The Transgressive Presidency: Donald J. Trump

by

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Abstract

It can be argued that the presidency of Donald Trump has been and indeed continues to be unlike any previous presidency. The Trump administration is defined by the idiosyncrasies of a person who, for many, was unqualified and, more damningly, unprepared for the role. Not surprisingly therefore, the Trump presidency has been subjected to sustained scrutiny, comment and analysis. It was thought that the office of president would constrain this president—as it has with his predecessors—however the now burgeoning weight of opinion is that President Trump is anything but constrained. But is this really the case? The orthodox view is that the Trump presidency is an aberration—but, as aberrant as the administration might be, the question that has to be asked is whether the Trump presidency is a threat to the democratic process it is claimed to be? It is argued here that to draw this conclusion is to make the mistake of conflating the rhetoric of Donald Trump with a slide towards autocracy. It seems that the critics of Trump want it both ways: on the one hand Trump is a thoroughgoing incompetent and, on the other, a nationalist ideologue who, through his Twitter account, is capable of exercising a Machiavellian grip on the American political process. The truth is more prosaic. Trump is an incompetent. Before becoming president, he poorly managed his business enterprises and has run the presidency equally poorly. His legislative successes have been few and far between. The argument that there is a framework of logic underpinning his presidency is to divine ideological successes as well administrative successes where there are none.

Donald Trump is more constrained than any president before him. This paper explores and describes those constraints—from the electorate, the office of the presidency, the constitution and most importantly those constraints as embodied by the holder of the office himself.

Declarations and Statements

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

I confirm that this thesis, presented for the degree of MA by Research, has been composed entirely by myself; it is solely the result of my own work and that all sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references and that a bibliography is appended.

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or processional qualification except as specified.

Mark Hughes

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Introduction

Donald Trump has never explained how he thinks politically. Such an assertion might sound odd given all that we think we know about this remarkable politician. Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, in their book, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View* (2017), make exactly this point—according to them, 'the world hungers for information on, and understanding of, Donald Trump' (p. xi). In many ways this was a remarkable admission because their book was authored *after* Trump had been elected president and, as the authors were acknowledging, little was known about how Trump thought politically despite the fact Trump was known for sharing his opinions on all sorts of matters and, more especially, for commenting on politics. Indeed, this was part of his celebrity: a willingness to say what he claimed needed to be said. However, his willingness to court controversy was revealing also of his many contradictory positions. Indeed, it was argued that Trump had 'turned self-contradiction into an art form' (Kruse and Weiland, 2016). Trump's political promiscuity was such that the same authors were left to ask if 'anyone has disagreed with Donald Trump more than Donald Trump?'

Oddly, therefore, despite Trump's frequent forays into the realm of politics his political beliefs remained something of a mystery. For example, Trump has never defined Trumpism or indeed provided anything like the sort of detailed insight we might expect from a presidential candidate detailing the rudiments of what he believes or what motivates him politically (Anton, 2016b). If anything, there is a strong case for arguing that Trump is apolitical—a proposition that may at first appear difficult to sustain. It will be argued that the singular most remarkable thing about Donald Trump's rise is the fiction that he is political: a fiction that has been propagated for different reasons by both right and the left. Both left and right assume that Trumpism is an ideologically coherent *and* a historically explicable phenomenon. Intrinsic to both arguments is the proposition that Trump is a logical and reasoned actor whose ideas are explicable.

I will argue that this can be explained: firstly, Donald Trump has never explained his politics or indeed why he takes the positions he does. This was not a conscious decision. Trump had not chosen to be deliberately enigmatic. Rather, as I will argue, his politics is marked by incoherence. He is ideologically unmoored. Secondly, this has not been without consequences, as I elucidate here. Trump's defenders argue his unconventional approach to politics can, in fact, be explained—for example, they contend that he is a pragmatist politician in the mould of Andrew Jackson. However, Trump's critics take a wholly different view. For them Trump is a modern-day Machiavelli bent on undermining the democratic foundations of America. Both sides of this argument share one thing in common: that Trump

is an ideologically driven politician. Trump's detractors find it difficult if not impossible to relinquish the idea that Trump is not an ideologue. For them, the evidence is *implicit* in his actions. For Trump's defenders this is *explicit*. These contrasting arguments are examined here and none of them hold up to scrutiny—indeed, both arguments would be found wanting, as I explain.

This thesis explains the difficulties that have beset efforts to define Donald Trump's politics. It is especially concerned with how Trump's critics have defined Trump's politics. By implicitly or else explicitly defining Trump as a Machiavellian politician his critics have built an explanatory framework that is premised on the idea that Trump behaves intentionally which, as I argue, has adversely impacted on our understanding of both Trump and his politics. However, as a necessary precursor, the thesis commences with an examination of how the hard-right have sought to define Trump's politics to conclude that these attempts, like those advanced by Trump's critics, do not stand-up to scrutiny.

This thesis was the result of reading *Unmaking the Presidency: Donald Trump's War on the World's Most Powerful Office* by Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes (2020a). The book's premise was simple: Donald Trump was remaking the presidency in ways that the Founders could not have contemplated. The argument was compelling. However, I was struck by an anomaly: to advance their argument the authors were proposing that Trump was a deliberative politician—in effect, Trump *intended* to unmake the presidency (and, if this syllogism was correct, the authors were arguing that Trump *intended* to remake the presidency). What do I mean by deliberative? The authors were, it seemed, reflexively, proposing that Donald Trump was an ideologically calculating and contemplative politician— this idea, that Trump was an ideological politician would, I subsequently realised, append to much else that was written about Trump—especially by his detractors. Indeed, to my surprise, the more I read about Trump the more this same argument would pertain. However, to me, Trump appeared to be anything other than an ideological politician. Yet, as I will argue, despite the enormous body of work that has been written about Trump and his presidency, this argument had not been fully explored which has meant that we have misunderstood Trump and indeed Trumpism.

This thesis addresses this misunderstanding and, in doing so, proposes a different approach to our understanding of Donald Trump, his political thinking and his presidency.

I will argue that despite the intense focus to which Trump has been subjected, his critics were making the mistake of approaching him as though he was a conventional politician. In doing so, and somewhat ironically, while they would routinely acknowledge just how far he was from being a conventional they would fail to comprehend how this contradiction

undermined their understanding of Trump. Trump is not a conventional politician but, as I argue, his critics understand as a conventional politician: this paradox explains why Trump has been misunderstood.

This failure of comprehension has considerable traction among Trump's critics—as Maggie Haberman (2022) explains at the conclusion to her book *Confidence Man: The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America:*

> I spent four years of his presidency getting asked by people to decipher what he was doing, but the truth is, ultimately, almost no one really knows him... he is often simply, purely opaque, permitting people to read meaning and depth into ever action, no matter how empty they may be. (p. 508)

Chapter One commences by examining Donald Trump's past for evidence of his political thinking by taking as its cue the work of Professor Michael Nelson (2006), a presidential scholar, who recommends that when assessing presidential behaviour we should look at 'patterns of past behaviour' as a predictor of future presidential performance. Using Nelson as a template, the chapter considers Trump's background and his qualifications to be president—this was especially important because Trump and the Trump campaign would draw heavily on the argument that Trump was an accomplished businessman who was uniquely qualified to be president. The discussion about Trump's business background sets the context for the subsequent chapters. It is particularly important because certain right-wing luminaries (Hanson, 2020a & 2020b; Gingrich, 2017a & 2017b and Mead, 2017) would variously argue that underlying Trump's unconventional approach to politics was a discernible political ideology.

Chapter two explains how and why the right sought to co-opt Trump to define and lend him an ideological identity—as the ideological heir to President Andrew Jackson. The chapter will argue that this is revealing for two reasons: firstly, the right were acknowledging that Trump was politically incoherent and secondly, to achieve their political purpose, Trump had to be leant a patina of coherence to be credible. To this ends the chapter explores the so-called *Jacksonian Tradition* to determine if Donald Trump could be described as a Jacksonian. Indeed, as recently as 2024, in a newly published work, Nick Bryant (2024, p. 67) claimed that Trump regarded Jackson 'as his presidential soulmate.' Bryant's contention was based on the fact that Trump had said that 'I have to tell you, I'm a fan'. The extent to which this might be true is considered here. The chapter is especially concerned with the work of Professor Walter Russell Mead (1999, 2017) who, following the emergence of Trump as a political force, was responsible for Jackson's ideological rehabilitation.[1]

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[1] Mead would influence Steve Bannon, Trump's policy advisor and early ideological guru (Glasser, 2018; Inskeep, 2016).

The chapter argues that the comparison with Jackson cannot be sustained. For example, there is no evidence that Trump knew of Andrew Jackson let alone understand why these comparisons were being made. In fact, Trump's embrace of Jacksonianism was fleeting and would soon end following his dismissal of Bannon as his chief strategist. Importantly, however, the chapter concludes that the comparison with Jackson did have a purpose: this was to locate Trump in a historical tradition that favourably compared him to a revered president and, moreover, it provided an ideological and explanatory framework that would, it was hoped, lend legitimacy to Trump and Trumpism that the right was seeking to establish (Harford, 2017). The comparison was, however, as Daniel Feller (2021) explains, a work of political exigency and historical misrepresentation—as Trump's fleeting engagement with the subject would unequivocally attest.

Chapter three consolidates the discussions in chapters one and two by asking if, ideologically, Trump could be described as a pragmatist—this was an argument made by Newt Gingrich (2017a, 2017b) and Mychal Massie (2017) respectively, both of whom are right-wing Trumpian advocates. In setting out their respective arguments they are at lengths to explain how and why Trump was different to other politicians. In so doing both authors focus on Trump's experience as a businessman in order to develop the argument that, ideologically, Trump should be understood as a pragmatist. Both Gingrich and Massie, albeit by different routes. both rely on the proposition that politics can be equated to business: in other words, political problems are of the same magnitude and order as business problems—Trump's 'flexibility' is evidence of his pragmatism. In other words, both are at lengths to argue that Trump's vacillation over policy is evidence of a pragmatic politician.

According to Gingrich, pragmatism can only be learnt through business (before it can be applied to political problems). Gingrich calls this the 'entrepreneurial approach to knowledge' which, he argues, is 'fact-based' (2017a, p. 276). Massie (2017) agrees with Gingrich that Trump is a pragmatist. Massie, however, is at lengths to explain how a pragmatic, business-minded president can end political gridlock and make government work. The important point for Massie is his contention that Trump is 'unconstrained'. By this he means that Trump enters politics without preconceptions: he is, in effect, objective because he is not beholden to a party much less 'the swamp'. This unorthodox politics means Trump will be able to approach politics unencumbered, this is because Trump is post-partisan.[2]

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[2] Laura Ingraham (2017, p. 63).

However, the chapter argues that Trump is not a pragmatist. Relying on the work of Jonathan Chait (2017a) the chapter explains why. According to Chait, this was characterised by Trump's failure to exploit the first two years of his presidency when both Houses were controlled by the GOP. Consider for example Trump's failure to repeal the American Care Act: this would exemplify his inability to harness 'the power of the office to persuade' (Neustadt, 1999, p. 24) which, a pragmatist and, more especially, a so-called pragmatist like Trump, would have been ready to exploit yet, in a rare moment of candour, Trump would acknowledge, 'no one knew' just how difficult repealing the ACA would be. What, of course, he was acknowledging was just how far he was from being a pragmatist—no doubt much to the chagrin of New Gingrich.

The chapter concludes that these attempts to define Trump and Trumpism are in fact the product of hard-right ideologues and conservative organisations who regard Trump as a willing vessel and vehicle for their own interests—which, revealingly, would explain why these attempts to define Trump would unravel. Trump's unconventional approach to politics could not be harnessed, let alone constrained as the right would discover.

Being unconventional Trump was impulsive, intemperate and impervious to moderation or unwelcome advice. These traits would follow him into the White House, yet, as chapter four explains, Trump's critics find it difficult to understand Trump on his own terms (Lamb & Neiheisel, 2020b; Boucheron, 2020; Zaretsky, 2016; Mansfield, 2016; Pfiffner, 2020). For his critics one of the most astonishing aspects of Trump's presidency was not the fact that Trump would trample over the norms of constitutional democracy but that he would do so with apparent impunity—which they attributed to a president who, they reasoned, had an ideological aversion to democracy. For many writers and commentators Trump was a Machiavellian politician—as demonstrated by his reluctance to engage with facts. Moreover, he was inconsistent, cynical and untrustworthy—all of which are cited as evidence of his Machiavellian shrewdness about which chapter four goes to some lengths to consider. Once the Machiavellian label was attached to Trump a framework for explaining him and his politics fell into place. However, we might consider that while Trump may have tested the guard rails of the constitution this testing was far from planned. In fact, Trump was not a Machiavellian politician, indeed there is a case for arguing that he is the very antithesis of Machiavelli's *Prince*. This was because Trump lacked genuine convictions about what was right or wrong—the absence of a coherent vision was matched only by a misunderstanding of what he could or could not do as president unlike, for example, FDR who embodied the very Machiavellian virtues that characterise *The Prince* (Morgan, 2022) The chapter contends that Trump's critics have never fully grasped the fact that Trump does not readily avail himself to conventional analysis and, paradoxically, make the mistake of interpreting him as

a conventional politician. Some writers have grasped this fact even though their work has not found a wider audience (Pitts, 2016; Roberts, 2017). This might be explained by the fact that that Trump's critics are reluctant to relinquish the enduring myth of his 'win at any cost' Machiavellianism—which may have something to do with the unconventional way he comports himself. It is, however, something of a mystery that this has not been fully explored, which is what chapter four attempts to do. The chapter analyses how Trump's critics understand him. In doing so the chapter is revealing of the fact that Trump is not a Machiavelli rather, the explanation is more prosaic, he is quite simply an ideologically unmoored, apolitical phenomena who, 'because of a fundamental lack of vision' (Waldman, 2017) and a penchant for controversy, has defied conventional explanation. Instead, his critics have heedlessly sought to define him as an ideologically explicable politician which he is not.

The thesis concludes that Trump is not a pragmatist nor indeed is he a Jacksonian and, more importantly, Trump is not a Machiavellian politician. What these labels represent is an attempt to define Trump: to rend coherent a politician who is incoherent to his critics and his defenders. Revealingly, the hard-right, in their overt efforts to define Trumpism are acknowledging what critics fail to comprehend: that Trumpism, paradigmatically, needs defining.

Objectivity and Trump

This thesis makes the argument that Donald Trump should be understood as a transgressive president. The idea for proposal arose after reflecting on the considerable body of work that Trump has generated. Consequently, the premise on which the research is based is dependent on certain presumptions which, because of the subject, are necessary preconditions for advancing the arguments discussed here. For example, the thesis is premised on a presumption that Trump is versed in the political art of dissembling and while all politicians might similarly be labelled Donald Trump is uniquely different in this regard with his disregard for truth (Alterman 2004, 2020).[3] Because of this, Trump's critics regard him as a Machiavellian.

It is certainly the case that when writing about a divisive political figure, such as Donald Trump, objectivity can appear to be compromised let alone readily obtained and maintained. This is most revealing, as I explain later, when we consider he work of Trump's critics. I will argue that their failure to understand Donald Trump is because they have approached their subject as though he could be explained in conventional terms. But Trump is not a conventional politician.

Given these restraints therefore the aim was to avoid material that was lacking in academic rigour or else obviously subjectively partisan. Nevertheless, Trump's unconventional politics poses a problem for the researcher: because much of the research concerned with Trump is critical of him, his politics and his presidency. This criticism is not without objective basis.[4] Consequently, finding presidential historians who took a less critical view of Trump, his politics and his presidency, would prove challenging, at best.[5] It should be noted that as a part of this research an extensive body of work was read and analysed. In addition, considerable emphasis was placed on material that challenged and undermined the thesis. However, this would prove to be far from easy. Many of the articles and books studied can reasonably be described as having a subjective view of Donald Trump. However, it is important to understand what this thesis is attempting to do. The thesis should be read as an attempt to understand how we understand Donald Trump. In so doing, the thesis considers how the critics of Donald Trump have (subjectively) understood him and his presidency. An

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[3] According to fact checkers at the *Washington Post* the total number of falsehoods and blatant lies told by Donald Trump during his presidency totalled 30, 573 (available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/).

[4] A survey of more than 150 credentialled political historians were asked by the American Political Association to rank the presidents. The survey ranked Trump last. The results are available at: https://presidentialgreatnessproject.com/

[5] Victor Davis Hanson of The Hoover Institution would, for example, prove to be an exception.

integral part of the thesis has been to try and balance these arguments by subjecting them to careful analysis and criticism to arrive at a different and, for the author, more plausible understanding of Donald Trump.

That said, the extent to which the researcher can meet the exacting requirement to be objective is challenging, more especially when researching political figures. By any objective measure Donald Trump has been and remains a divisive figure. The purpose of this research has been to analyse how Trump's critics have misunderstood him and his presidency. While the premise for this thesis is entirely subjective—as of logical necessity—the author has sought to subject this premise to analysis in order to arrive at an objective assessment about Donald Trump and his presidency.

Methodology

The research methodology adopted for the purposes of this thesis was to undertake a *literary review*. Logically, this methodology was preferred because the premise for the thesis would not readily avail itself to any other form of research.

The research methodology focused on the extensive and burgeoning literature generated by Donald Trump's candidacy and, latterly, his presidency. However, it should be noted that throughout this research and even as late as the submission of this thesis there remains a dearth of academic textbooks available to the Trump researcher. This can be explained, no doubt, by the fact that this thesis commenced towards the end of the Trump presidency and before anything like a definitive assessment of Trump's presidency has been written. Largely, therefore, the research would be reliant on non-academic source books, journals and newspaper articles and, while these sources were authored by respected journalists[6] (rather than academics), considerable weight must, nevertheless, be placed on their writings as source material. While reliance on these sources may be questionable in academic terms it must be borne in mind that much of the academic research that would indeed become available, i.e. academic journal articles, as well as historical and political academic textbooks, would draw heavily on the same journalistic sources.

Firstly, the books written or co-authored by Donald Trump were subject to analysis. Thereafter, focus moved to books and articles that predated Trump's 2016 presidential candidacy (many of which were biographical accounts). The process then became more discerning and focused: various academic and non-academic works were analysed—with particular attention paid to the materials on which these works were reliant. In effect, this was a reductive process. In addition, considerable focus was placed on material emanating from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* which proved to be invaluable sources of information. In addition, considerable online research was undertaken using key words and phrases. The journal, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, was particularly useful as was *The American Presidency Project* (for access to Trump's *Twitter* account).

It should be noted that this field of research is a dynamic and emerging field of study, more especially so since Trump decided to seek a second term of office. As such, our understanding of this politician, his politics and his presidency will remain far from settled.

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[6] Many of whom were members of the White House press corps.

Literature Review

This literature review is premised on the proposition that Donald Trump has been misunderstood. This misunderstanding became most apparent when, after winning the presidency, political thinkers from the right felt compelled to define Trump and, more especially, his politics. This was both revealing and also an admission (Anton, 2016b). Trump had not been expected to win the nomination of the Republican Party let alone the presidency. Before then his forays into politics had been dismissed as whimsical attempts to garner publicity. Not surprisingly, Trump's politics, such as they were, did not lend themselves to easy explanation. In a forty-year career of airing his views on American life and politics Trump's mantra that he could do a better job than most politicians who, in his opinion, had imperilled American competitiveness and standing in the world.

As anticipated, the literature review was revealing of an attempt, by Trump's supporters (from the right), to frame Trumpism as a coherent ideology. In doing so they would, at least commence from a premise that recognised Trump's incoherence. Contrastingly, and somewhat paradoxically, Trump's critics (from the mainstream) recognised his ideological incoherence but were unable to relinquish the lure of trying to define Trump as a deliberative politician. The motivation for the right was clear—as I will argue. But, more pressing, was the question about why Trump's critics would embrace the idea that somehow, amidst the incoherence, Trump could be made coherent. The thesis will explain why Trump's critics have adopted this explanatory model and, more importantly, it explains why this model is the cause of so much misunderstanding about Trump, his politics and his presidency.

The literature review commences by reviewing the books written by Donald Trump and the problems they reveal when trying to develop an understanding of him, his politics and his presidency.

The literature review then considers how the right have tried to define Trump by focusing on the work of Newt Gingrich (2017a) and Victor Davis Hanson (2020) respectively. Here, the various undertakings by the right are of particular importance to my wider premise that Trump has been misunderstood. Implicit in their efforts to lend Trump a patina of political credibility is an admission that Trump was, at best a political naif, who had little or no idea about how he would translate his high blown rhetoric—sometimes referred to as grievance politics or the politics of resentment—into meaningful policies: he was, it seemed, an opportunist who did not understand politics and a populist who did not understand populism (Anton, 2015b). Suffice to say, Trump was not an ideologue—his understanding of politics was confined to the moment, as the right would recognise.

The literature review then moves to firstly consider the work of Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms (2017), *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View* and then, secondly, the work of Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe (2018), *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump*. Both books are by academics who have set to explain Trump. Suffice to say there are discernible failings in both books—insofar both books are revealing of an implicit (or sometimes explicit) predilection, that is shared by many academics when analysing Trump, which is inferring intentionality when there is no evidence of intent. In other words, because of a lack of evidence the authors presume otherwise in order to make their arguments.

Thereafter the work of the noted presidential scholar James Pfiffner (2018, 2020, 2021 & 2022) was considered. Pfiffner has written extensively about Trump, Trumpism and the Trump presidency—his analysis of Donald Trump can broadly be characterised as critical. Pfiffner's analysis of Trump is revealing of a premise that is often times explicit and draws upon the idea that Trump is a Machiavellian politician. This premise allows Pfiffner to construct a rationale that defines Trump and, in doing so, it introduces, by implication, a framework within which the author can infer an intent to Trump which then becomes the basis for understanding how Trump acts and behaves. While this is entirely understandable it does not acknowledge the fact that we do not know what Trump intends much less do we understand him. The problem is that Pfiffner, like other critics, has incorrectly premised his analysis on a conception of Trump that, when analysed, cannot be substantiated and, because this conception of Trump has such a compelling grip on the collective imagination it becomes difficult to relinquish and, more tellingly, it explains why Trump's critics have misunderstood Trump. Pfiffner makes the mistake of searching for coherence where there is none. If we are to understand Trump correctly then the transgressive presidency requires a wholly different explanatory framework.

Finally, Susan Hennesey and Benjamin Wittes' (2020a) book *The Unmaking of the Presidency*: *Donald Trump's War on the World's Most Powerful Office* is reviewed. The authors argue that Trump is remaking the presidency in his own image. Hennessey and Wittes commence by arguing that Trump is transforming the office of the president and is doing so by pursuing a particular 'vision of the presidency' (which they describe as the 'expressive presidency). However, the authors fail to make clear if the transformation of the office is attributable to the workings of an unconventional president or, as they seem to imply, the intentional result of a deliberative (and therefore conventional) politician. The authors are unable to relinquish the temptation to try and define Trump but, in doing so, their critique—while revealing and valuable—is premised on the misconception that Trump is a conventional politician. Had they started from the premise that Trump was a

transgressive president their conclusions about how Trump was remaking the presidency would be closer to the mark—which is what this thesis attempt to achieve.

It is the authors contention that the books reviewed demonstrate a gap in our understanding that the thesis attempts to remedy.

Trump is cited as the author of a number of books of which three can be characterised as political: *The America We Deserve* (2000), *Time to get Tough* (2011) and *Great Again: How to Fix a Crippled America* (2015a). In addition, *The Art of the Deal* (1987), though not obviously political is generally regarded as a primer for analysing Trump and, therefore, has been included here. Notably, with the exception of *The Art of the Deal*, the books were published to coincide with the presidential election cycles of 2000, 2012 and 2016 respectively.

All four books have been widely reviewed, analysed and poured over (Lozada, 2020b, 2020c). There is a reason for this. As I explained in my opening: Donald Trump's presidency was unexpected and, as such, his political views had been subject to little or no scrutiny. There was therefore, an imperative to understand what a Trump presidency might mean.[7]

What becomes apparent from *The Art of the Deal,* and which then runs seamlessly through Trump's later books, is his dismissal of politicians and contempt for the political process and, more tellingly, his conviction that all political problems can be resolved by doing 'a deal'. Over the four books Trump does not explain how a business deal might be applied to the world of politics. What cannot be doubted is Trump's conviction that all political problems can be resolved by a deal—not surprisingly Trump would modestly declare that 'our country needs a truly great leader, and we need a truly great leader now. We need a leader that wrote 'The Art of the Deal.'[8]

Trump's books can readily be summarised as the musings of someone not given to understanding the complexities of politics. His views contradict themselves which, given his various flirtations with different political parties over the years, is hardly surprising. The difficulty, therefore, as I alluded to earlier, was how to explain Trump and his politics—something which, after reviewing Trump's books, Dylan Matthews (2017) described as 'a fool's errand'. Trump's books make for a difficult read: for example, in *Time to Get Tough* (2011), Trump explains that there should be a 20 per cent tax on companies that outsource jobs yet two pages later (p. 65) he calls for a 15 per cent tax on the same companies. This is but one example of many.

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[7] Lozada (2015) describes these efforts as an attempt 'to develop a unified theory of the man, or at least find a method in the Trumpness'.

[8] The comment was made by Trump in2015 during when announcing his intention to run for the presidency.

As a politician, Trump's contradictions explain Trump albeit not in the way that Trump may have envisaged. When, in 2016, Trump became the nominee of the Republican Party, these contradictions had to be addressed—especially by the right. Consequently, commentators and academics from the right would attempt to lend Trump substance by, for example, hailing Trump as the heir to President Andrew Jackson or else referring to Trump as a pragmatist politician—both of which were attempts to define and explain Trump by framing him as a considered but misunderstood politician. [9]

The most pressing criticism that arises from reading these books and it is something on which this thesis draws is the glaringly obvious failure of Trump to explain himself politically. We can discern the development of what would become signature themes: economic nationalism, foreign policy isolationism and a hostility to immigrants but, other than to describe these issues in broad generalisations the books are revealing of someone who was unable to provide any sort of meaningful explanation or context for why he thinks as he does.

<u>Newt Gingrich, *Understanding Trump* (2017a) & Victor Davis Hanson, *The Case for Trump* (2020a)</u>

In his book *Understanding Trump* (2017a), Newt Gingrich argues that 'Trump is... a pragmatist, not an ideologue' (p. 11). Like Victor Davis Hanson (2020a), Gingrich conflates Trump's opportunism and political posturing as virtues—while Hanson describes Trump as 'a classically tragic hero' comparable to the Athenian politician Themistocles, Gingrich prefers to describe Trump's pragmatism as the 'reversion to Tocqueville, Washington and Lincoln' (op cit). [10] Both see Trump as a heroic figure.

Whether Trump was a Jacksonian pragmatist or indeed a Jacksonian realist is debatable but the emergence of these schools of thought owed a debt to the work of Walter Russell Mead. It could be said that it was Mead who revitalised 'Jacksonianism' (1999 & 2017). [11] As Daniel Feller (2021) explains:

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[9] Andrew Jackson was president from 1829 to 1837.

[10] *The Case for Trump*, p. 23. See also Chotiner (2019).

[11] 'Realism' is a school of thought principally associated with foreign policy analysis. Brands and Feaver (2017), explain that realism is concerned with questions of power politics or realpolitik as they play out within the context of international relations. They explain that 'realism has taken many forms over the years, but it has always been focused on the imperatives of power, order, and survival in an anarchic global arena'. It is argued that Trump is a student of realism, given his views on America's position in the world and more especially his views on international relations. However, I am more concerned with Trump as a 'realist' i.e. as a businessman politician schooled in the art of negotiating deals.

> Jackson has attracted a flood of attention over the last four years, nearly all of it sparked by his supposed resemblance to the current president. [...] Trump and his acolytes celebrate the qualities they admire in Jackson: his blunt speech, his special connection to the plain people and suspicion and hostility toward the political establishment, his combative approach to the rest of the world, and his willingness to go in headfirst and smash up the status quo—in domestic politics, in foreign affairs, and even in matters of protocol, social convention, and personal behaviour (p. 668).

What we do know was that Trump was the harbinger of a new kind of politics and while these different labels might amount to nothing more than a distinction without a difference, they were revealing of a widely accepted view among the right that Trumpism reflected the reemergence of a political tradition that harked back to Jackson. But was Trump the heir to Jackson—as Mead would maintain? This thesis will argue the contrary. Revealingly, Gingrich's thesis is based on a false narrative that draws on a self-validating version of American politics and history as I will later explain.

Victor Davis Hanson, a pro-Trump right wing academic, classicist and senior fellow at the Hoover Institute, has written extensively about Trump and Trumpism. In an early paper, (2017a) titled *What Exactly is Trumpism*, Hanson made the telling observation that there were 'no Trump political philosophers.' Hanson then goes to some lengths to argue that Trump should be understood as a pragmatist in the mould of Andrew Jackson—according to Hanson Trump, like Jackson, was someone who had little time for high blown political theories (Hoover Institution, 2019[12]). Latterly, in his book, *The Case for Trump* (2020a), Hanson restates his argument noting that 'Trump was not an ideologue' (p. 92). In effect, Hanson was arguing that as a businessman Trump would deploy sound judgement and entrepreneurial flair to rationally identify problems, break them down, and then fix them—pragmatism would, he seemed to be arguing, trump abstraction (i.e. politics). This, for Hanson, was what Trumpism meant. These arguments carried considerable weight as well received attempts to rebalance criticism of Donald Trump from the perspective of a conservative commentator who was at lengths to explain why Trump had been misunderstood. However, having developed his case for Trump Hanson proceeds to eschew the logic of his own argument by smuggling in the argument that a pragmatist was different to an ideologue. Hanson's sleight of hand was to ignore Trump's unconventional behaviour by preferring instead to reinterpret it as a strategy adopted by a pragmatist but, in developing his argument, Hanson is compelled to accept that Trump is a 'capitalist-nationalist-populist' (2020a, p. 257). Thus, according to Hanson's contradictory position, Trump's unconventional behaviour was a strategic ploy (ibid, p. 125). By this logic Trump's inability to fashion a campaign plan or indeed make adequate preparations for government

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[12] In an interview to discuss his book, *The Case for Trump*.

were, according to Hanson, evidence of Trump's strengths—rather, Trump was, argues Hanson, operating by a different playbook even if Trump was unable to articulate what that playbook was (ibid, p. 147). Patently, the fact that Hanson felt it necessary to make the case for Trump is, of course, revealing and moreover the fact that a case had to be made for Trump was also revealing of an uncomfortable truth which was that Trump was incapable of articulating a coherent vision for America.

<u>Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View* (2017)</u>

Simms and Laderman argue that despite much of the criticism levelled at Donald Trump he has retained a consistent 'world view'. According to them Trump 'has been remarkably consistent in his comments about US trade relations for three decades' (p. 124). This is indeed the case. Simms and Laderman attribute to Trump 'a consistently expressed, if roughly defined, set of positions on [foreign policy] issues, which taken together, comprised the rudiments of his world view' (p. 125). Oddly, they later conclude that there is a need to understand Trump's 'core convictions' (p. 133).

Moreover, in their extensive review of Trump's comments over a thirty-year period they mistakenly conflate what Trump says with what Trump understands: to paraphrase Salena Zito (2016) they make the mistake of taking Trump seriously *and* literally. It is not disputed that Trump has been vocal in his complaints that America was being 'ripped off' off by foreign competitors. However, this hardly comprises a world view simply because Trump has been consistently saying the same thing. Other than China taking the place of Japan in his ire the only consistent characteristic about Trump's views is that they have remained consistently ill informed: in other words, he has not demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the world as one might expect. Trump's views might be consistent but could hardly be described as coherent. The failure by the authors to make this connection is troubling. They argue in their preface that 'there is no monograph that explores the coherence of Trump's views over time or examines them in their proper historical context' (p. xi). It can be assumed that the authors regard their book as an attempt to correct this. However, the failure to properly examine Trump's worldview is revealing. In effect, by uncritically accepting Trump at this word, the authors are compelled to regard Trump as a conventional politician. In this highly particularised context Trump appears to be politician who is philosophically grounded—presumably this is what they mean by coherent? Unfortunately, however, this is not the case with Trump, as the authors should have discerned. Throughout their book the authors fail to properly analyse Trump's worldview much less subject Trump's views to any form of critical analysis. It is, as if, Trump appeared

on the political stage with a fully informed and coherent worldview that booked no further analysis.

I will argue that Simms and Laderman's is an example of how historians have misunderstood Trump. At the conclusion the authors assert that they had provided an understanding about how Trump might be expected to conduct himself once elected. However, personal obsessions, are hardly the basis for conducting foreign policy—as Trump would discover once he was elected. Indeed, when we reflect on the Trump presidency, the work of Simms and Laderman is wanting for its failure to properly analyse Trump. This is because the authors make the mistake of lending credibility to Trump's prognostications—in effect, because Trump was unexpectedly elected, they are compelled to retrospectively seek evidence for their argument that Trump had a 'world view'. This, however, is a fool's errand. Everyone has a world view—and, for most of us that world view is premised on very limited information—which is the case for Donald Trump. The failure of this book is to consider the very real possibility that Donald Trump's 'world view' is nothing more than the prejudices of someone who knows very little about history or indeed politics.

Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe, *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump* (2018)

In their book *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump* the authors, Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe (2018), contend that Donald Trump was an extraordinary president because he defied convention. However, according to them, his presidency was, contrastingly, ordinary. They explain that it was Trump's penchant for the extraordinary (in terms of his behaviour and unconventional approach to the presidency) which, paradoxically, would render his presidency ordinary (p. 130). They explain that:

> on almost every aspect imaginable, Donald trump is an extraordinary president. We do not claim or argue that President Trump is anything less than extraordinary or anything approaching ordinary [however] while Trump is an extraordinary president, his presidency is quite ordinary (p.216).

The authors provide a detailed explanation about why they describe Trump as extraordinary. According to them, Trump was extraordinary because: he was an *outsider*—an 'anti-politician' and 'anti-establishment' candidate who would 'drain the swamp' of political corruption (p. 14); he was a *disruptor* who 'refused to follow the normal conventions and patterns of... behaviour' (p. 18). Additionally, he was a *populist* (p. 37) who would 'present himself as the only candidate [who would tell] the electorate a deeper truth about the corrupt political system' (p. 39). And, as an *insurgent* who would challenge the political order with 'a plan to change the power structure in Washington (p. 42). According to the authors it was Trump's disregard for convention that made him extraordinary and what would prove to be

even more extraordinary was the fact that, despite himself, he would be elected president. The authors explain that they have set out to 'challenge the thesis that [a] Trump presidency would be extraordinary' (p. 41). Herein lies the paradox about Trump: the very attributes that made his candidacy so extraordinary would, they argue, undermine and compromise his presidency, rendering it ordinary, as the authors detail. However, it could be argued that his presidency *was* extraordinary, but for very different reasons—as I explain below.

For Herbert et al the Trump presidency was 'ordinary in its outcomes and accomplishments' (p. 216) and, while few presidencies rise above the ordinary, uniquely, the Trump presidency would be extraordinary for its failings—as the authors explain: 'Trump [was] just not very good at being president' (p. 10). They then detail his many failings as president—which have been extensively documented elsewhere. The authors attribute Trump's problems to a failure of what they call 'presidential methodology' (p. 3) which, as they later explain, 'damage[d] his capacity to lead' (p. 157). It is curious that that the authors eschew the opportunity to describe the Trump presidency as extraordinary for its failings. Indeed, the import from their analysis tends to suggest that if Trump had got his methodology right his presidency may have risen above the ordinary. Instead, they rely on the argument that 'Trump looks especially ordinary next to the scale of his promises and the absurdity of his claims as to their delivery' (p. 218). However, I would hasten that this was clearly evident from the outset of the Trump campaign for the presidency and became patently so as his campaign progressed.

In their second chapter they set out the arguments for Trump's extraordinariness explaining that 'it is important to be transparent, to set out all sides of the argument' (p. 14). Such a claim leads the reader to assume that the authors will be relying upon academic source material to support of their argument. However, they are unable to do so. Revealed herein is the problem for someone seeking to research Trump and the Trump presidency: it is the dearth of academic literature that would, in this case, the lend what the authors refer to as 'intellectual heft' to their proposition that Trump was indeed extraordinary (p. 138). The challenge, as the authors allude to, is one of how to obtain a balanced and nuanced picture of someone who, like Trump, resides outside convention. As the authors explain: '[Trump] was remarkably ill-informed and... his ideas were not rooted in a coherent movement with foundations in ideological trends' (p. 138) and, as they later explain, nor would Trump offer any sort of ideological clarity about this thinking (p. 143).

Trump was an outsider, a disruptor, a nationalist and an insurgent but so are most populists. What the authors fail to tackle, and this is implicit throughout much of what they have written, is the fact that Trump was unable to explain why he was a populist let alone what nationalism meant. Consequently, the authors are left to assume that Trump intentionally

set out to be an outsider/disruptor/populist/insurgent who was bent on disrupting the political status quo to make America great again. But, as the evidence suggests, and the evidence is considerable, Trump was unable to explain his thinking—indeed the authors say as much when they quote Mark Krikorian who observed that Trump's political thinking amounted to nothing more than 'some… guy at the end of the bar yelling his opinions' (p. 93). It is perplexing therefore that the authors miss the fact that Trump's ideological vacuity might explain his ordinariness.

Notwithstanding this, the authors variously imply or else suggest that Trump is an ideologically driven politician. For example, at p. 172, they refer to 'Trump's ideology' but offer no further explanation. Then, two paragraphs later, they contradict themselves noting that 'Trump could not seem to find a clear position or commit to it [which] suggested that he knew neither where he wanted to take the party nor how to take it there' (op cit). The whole point of having an ideological position is that it gives a politician clarity. Similarly, they describe how 'Trump's governing strategy' failed to deliver him influence in Washington (p. 158). But as we know from the authors detailed analysis, Trump had no governing strategy but, within a page, they state that '[Trump] wanted to overthrow the Washington orthodoxy but had no clear policy proposals or much idea about how to effect change (p. 159). Either Trump had a governing strategy, or he did not. This confusion is compounded when they claim that Trump had failed to offer 'the ideological clarity required to give his views appropriate weight' (p. 143). The import is that Trump was ideologically confused yet this is something the authors are at lengths to dismiss when describing the Trump agenda as 'hollow' (p. 136). The authors are not alone in making these mistakes. Right-wing academics have sought to lend Trump and Trumpism intellectual heft by arguing that his politics are rooted ideologically but, revealingly, when trying to lend this much needed intellectual heft they are compelled to make a virtue of Trump's incoherence in order to make their case. Similarly, Trump's critics have focused on Trump's many failings as a putative politician and how this has impacted on his presidency. However, just as the authors have done throughout their text, Trump's critics are want to dismiss him on the one hand and on the other they refer to Trump as an ideologically driven politician without recognising how this confusion adds to our misunderstanding about how we understand Trump. The problem is that the authors fail to give weight to the proposition that Trump is nothing more than a guy at the end of the bar yelling his opinions.

Moreover, in their thesis, the authors make little or no reference to Trump's penchant for distorting the truth. It is my contention that if we want to understand Trump and, more especially, understand how we understand Trump then we might better start by trying to understand how and why Trump lies. I argue that the insights from this offer a far more

penetrating explanatory model for why we misunderstand Trump—and, while it is easy to say that we do so at our peril—we can be sure that whatever threat Trump poses to democratic norms he is sure to sabotage himself.

<p align="center">James Pfiffner, The Contemporary Presidency: Organizing the Trump Presidency (2018); The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy (2020); Donald Trump and the Norms of the Presidency (2021) & How Trump Tried to Overturn the 2020 Election (2022)</p>

James Pfiffner is especially critical of Donald Trump and his presidency. In a series of emails with the author, Pfiffner discusses his work (see the appendices). At issue was Pfiffner's contention that Trump can be understood as a Machiavellian politician. In the email exchange the author argued that Trump's behaviour was not that of a Machiavellian politician but rather, that it should be understood as the result of Trump's transgressive behaviour. Pfiffner has variously argued that Trump was Machiavellian because of what he calls Trump's 'intuitive' understanding of what works politically. However, this would be to misunderstand Machiavelli—which is a mistake that Pfiffner shares with other similarly minded critics of Trump (Benner, 2017b). Pfiffner fails to comprehend that for Trump, the role of president has nothing to do with politics. Politically, Trump's only engagement in the role of president is presentational, but even this he struggles with. For example, in terms of policy, Trump is unable to explain what he doesn't know or understand what he should know which leaves him perplexed: as a result, he dissembles—now this might appear to be the work of a modern-day Machiavelli but, as Benner (2017b) explains, this is to misunderstand Machiavelli. Pfiffner makes the mistake of inferring intent—like many critics of Trump, Pfiffner relies on inference from something Trump does or says: this then becomes the premise for understanding Trump. This can be a compelling form of analysis. However, such an approach is highly subjective and herein resides a revealing paradox: the less we know about the Trump the more vulnerable we are to 'reading' intent into his every action, which is precisely what Pfiffner is inclined to do. What Pfiffner and other critics fail to understand is that Trump's incoherence is exactly that. He has no political hinterland. His successes are despite himself, as he has demonstrated. For example, we might ask: is Trump authentically malign or just pretending to be? The answer is that he doesn't know—which Pfiffner and many of Trump's critics fail to grasp.

Trump's critics have appeared exercised about how to comprehend Trump.[13] On the one hand they acknowledge Trump's political vacuity while making on the other hand the sometimes-contradictory argument that Trump was consciously pursuing an authoritarian agenda. Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes (2020a) fall into this trap in their book *The Unmaking of the Presidency*. By portraying Trump as a threat to the constitutional order they lend credence to the argument that Trump is a deliberative politician who was following a reasoned policy when, in fact, the evidence is to the contrary. It is not disputed that Trump may have been unmaking the presidency—but what is at issue is the question about whether Trump was unmaking the presidency by *deliberation*. The authors argue that Trump was 'remaking the office itself in his own image' (p. 11). He was, according to them, pursuing a 'vision of the presidency' (ibid, p. 8). Hennessey and Wittes may be correct, and Trump may indeed pose a threat to the constitutional order but, as I will argue, this was not because he had deliberated about how the constitution might be circumvented: there is no evidence that Trump had set out to remake the office much less was he pursuing a vision of the presidency—and the authors are unable to offer any evidence that would substantiate this argument. However, Bob Woodward is helpful here (2021, p. 189). Following an interview with Trump, Woodward explains that 'as I listened, I was struck by the vague, directionless nature of Trump's comments... [he] couldn't seem to articulate a strategy or plan for the country'. In the same interview Trump would confirm as much when he explained 'I don't have a strategy' (ibid, p. 188).

Hennessey and Wittes are not alone. Puzzlingly, when analysing Trump, his critics have tended to proceed from a position that Trump was a strategic politician pursuing a considered and predetermined political path that owed itself to some underlying ideological position. This is often attributed to the fact that Trump's unorthodox behaviour is thought to be the work of a deliberative politician schooled in the art of deception. Consider for example what Chandler James (2021) describes as Trump's 'outrageous behaviour.'[14] In his paper James defines outrageous behaviour as 'norm-violating behaviour or discourse *intended* to arouse an intense emotional response, particularly anger, fear, or moral indignation' (ibid. p. 411). It is not disputed that Trump uses such behaviour. However, like Hennessey and Wittes, James makes the all-too-common mistake of asserting that this was a tactic borne of what he describes as a 'politically advantageous public relations strategy' (ibid, p. 412).

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[13] Trump's critic's fall into any number of schools whether that is liberal, left, academia, establishment or a combination of one or more of the other.

[14] Chandler uses the American spelling of 'behavior'.

According to James, Trump had deliberated about the merits of deploying outrageous behaviour because he had a preconceived idea that this behaviour would succeed where unobjectionable behaviour would not. Hennessey and Wittes are unable to offer any evidence that Trump's deployment of this type of behaviour was the result of strategic thinking or planning. Rather, the evidence is assumed or implied.

Chapter 1

The Cambridge Dictionary defines *Trumpism* as the 'the policies and political ideas of the US president Donald Trump'.[15] But what exactly are these ideas—can they be readily understood and, importantly, how do we understand them in the context of the Trump presidency?

These questions arise because Donald Trump has been described as a 'political chameleon' (Kranish & Fisher, 2017, p. 271). His positions on any of the important political issues of the day have, over the years, moved—oftentimes by one hundred and eighty degrees (Filipovic, 2020; Kornacki, 2018). For students of politics Donald Trump can present as a uniquely difficult study. Despite a considerable body of work about him, his family and his rise to the presidency, scarcely little is known about his politics (Reeve, 2015). He has not committed his thoughts about what politics means to him to paper—at least not in a way that is readily comprehensible (Enten, 2016; Graham, 2018). This is especially unusual given that Trump has been credited with the authorship of numerous books stretching back to 1987 in which he revealed a marked inclination for commenting on the social, economic and political issues of the day (Foderaro, 1989; Romano, 1984; Sankin, 2015). Yet, despite, his prolific output, there is little to be discerned from his fulminations about the state of America that might pass for a coherent set of beliefs, much less a political philosophy (Enten, 2016; Matthews, 2017; Smith G, 2017). Even in his most obviously political book, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (2015a), he is found wanting—as the journalist Matt Yglesias (2017) explains:

> Looking to the text of Trump's book for a precise picture of what, exactly, he would do as president seems misguided. The important proposition of the book is simply that America is broken, and Trump has the business skills to fix it. He's not going to tell you exactly *how* it's going to happen. He's not even going to promise you that the things he says are 100 percent accurate (rather than calculated for political effect). But he's a guy who gets things done. So, trust him.

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[15] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/trumpism

The Art of the Fix

Despite the aforementioned difficulties the object of this first chapter is to focus on the president's business background—to ascertain if his business life can tell us anything about his thinking and what impact, if at all, this may have had on him and his political ideas? As a businessman of some repute (with a penchant for commenting on political matters) Donald Trump would contend that he held the solutions to society's ills.[16] Moreover, as Mollan and Geesin (2020) note, 'Trump was a familiar and popular face for decades before becoming a political candidate'. Therefore, we should be able to discern something of Donald Trump's politics—or, at the very least, the formative outline of a set of political ideas that would comprise Trumpism.[17]

Why is this important? It is important because Trump's critics have argued that he and his administration represent an *ideological* threat to democracy and to the democratic institutions of the United States (Brettschneider, 2019; Baker, 2017; Cohen, 2020; Conway, 2019; Dean & Altemeyer, 2021; Frum,2018; Gessen, 2021; Goldsmith, 2017; Hennessey & Wittes, 2020a & 2020b; Johnson, 2018; Kendzior, 2020; McQuade, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2016; Mounk, 2020; Stevens, 2020; Wilson, 2018). If this is true, we have to ask from where this threat emerges, what form does it manifest itself and, importantly, whether Donald Trump is driven by an ideology that is capable of threatening the constitutional arrangements of the United States, as his critics are wanting to allege. These questions are important also because of what they tell us about how a president governs. They are located in and revealed through his convictions, ideals and beliefs which, in turn, are reflected in the office of the presidency and through the administrative apparatus of the executive. Professor George Edwards (2006, p. 7) underlines and contextualises why the answers to these questions are important: 'The way presidents attempt to govern, and their successes in doing so, has profound consequences for politics and public policy.' According to Michael Siegel (2017), the politics and core convictions of a president are expressed through policies (his vision), structures (his style of management) and the processes (his decision-making) of an administration.

If we are to understand Donald Trump and more especially his presidency then logically, we should begin with an examination of his politics before he entered the political fray.[18] As

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[16] Trump's habit of publicly inveighing himself in political debate and courting controversy can be traced back to 1980.

[17] The paper concentrates on Donald Trump's prognostications before he became president.

[18] The thesis uses the male gendered terms *man* or *men* for convenience (in recognition of the fact that the forty-six occupants of the office to date, have all been men).

Michael Kruse (2016a) explained '[Trump] arrived in politics with a management approach built entirely outside the demands of public life' it was, as Kruse described in a later article, 'a proto-political operation' (2020). Therefore, the aim here is to determine whether we can identify a coherent set of ideas that would come to underpin his presidency.

The chapter takes as its premise Professor Michael Nelson's proposition that to understand a president we should look for patterns of behaviour in their past (2006, p. 186). In an earlier paper Nelson explained that scholars should take 'a 'hard look' at a president's past (1980, p. 650). Understanding the presidency is important—and would become especially so in the person of Donald Trump and his unorthodox presidency (Lozada, 2020b). More broadly, however, this has its own imperatives because the presidency has become 'the focus for the most intense and persistent emotions in the American polity' (Barber, 1978, p. 581) or, more succinctly, 'all things to all men' (Hodgson, 1984). Indeed, Barber's analysis appears especially pertinent in the current climate because, as Zachery Karabell (2017) explains, Trump has, 'by virtue of his office, become the singular focal point of American politics and, arguably, American life'. Moreover, if Nelson is correct, Trump's background as a businessman will be revealing—about his politics, his thinking and his presidency but more especially, it may explain why he has become such an extraordinary phenomenon. For example, Mollan and Geesin (2020) argue that Trump's understanding of business would become 'embedded in the organization of government' and, more importantly, would act as 'a lever for substantial change'.[19] Exactly what influenced these changes is the subject of this chapter. Elsewhere, others have argued that Trump was relying on 'a particular reading of his business career to present himself as the 'personification of American "greatness"' (Spector & Wilson, 2018). Presidential scholar Richard Neustadt (1990, p. 208) reinforces these points when he explained that if we want a guide to understanding how presidential candidates perform in office then it is imperative that we should look at their previous experiences as well as their previous employment because, as Margalit Fox (2006) enjoins, when choosing a president, we should not 'count on major changes in [their] basic personality, ... beliefs or... political skills'. Notably, Arthur Schlesinger reminds us that

> The American presidency was peculiarly personal institution... But, more than most agencies of government, it changed shape, intensity and ethos according to the man in charge. Each President's distinctive temperament and character, his values, standards, style, his habits, expectations, idiosyncrasies, compulsions, phobias recast the White House and pervaded the entire government (2004, p. 212).

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[19] Unless quoting directly I use British rather than American English as the preferred spelling.

Moreover, as Dan McAdams (2016) perceptively noted about Donald Trump, 'as social actors, our performances are out there for anyone to see'.

If Trump was drawing upon his business career as a guide to the presidency, then the extent to which this influenced his thinking demands closer examination. But this is not without difficulties.[20] How, for example, do we approach Trump's business life without considering his character and personality (McAdams, 2016)? Moreover, because a business, like any organisation, is reliant on the people who run it (this would seem especially so in the case of the Trump Organisation [21]), it would be implausible to try and advance an argument about the efficacy of the presidency without first understanding how Donald Trump ran and organised his businesses before entering office (Dokko, Wilk & Rothband, 1981). James David Barber contends that to understand a president 'the first need is to see the man whole—not as some abstract' (1985, p. 1).[22] This is because the 'personal stories [about] a candidate's life are... used to establish credibility, legitimacy and a narrative [about] the suitability of the candidate and their ability to embody and implement [...] policy when in office' (Mollan and Geesin, 2020). For presidential historian Richard Norton-Smith[23]

> experience never exists in isolation—it is always a factor that coexists with temperament, training, background... not just what they've done but how they've done it and what they've learned from it (Von Drehle, 2008).

The question posed here asks if President Trump's business acumen has been realised— has Donald Trump succeeded in his twin aims to 'make America great again' (Kaczynski, 2017)[24] and to 'drain the swamp' (Harrington, 2016; Bhunjun, 2018) and, if realised, what were the ideological drivers that begat these changes and can they be located through an understanding of him as a businessman?

Before becoming the 45th President of the United States Donald Trump was known first and foremost as a celebrity New York businessman and real-estate developer (Street, 2019).[25] He

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[20] For a detailed psychological analysis and critique of Donald Trump, see for example: McAdams, 2020a and Winter, 2018.

[21] Details about the *Trump Organization* can be found at https://www.trump.com/

[22] For a critique of Barber's work see Nelson (1980). In an earlier paper Barber (1978) was at lengths to acknowledge the pitfalls of psychological analysis when he stated: 'I am not about to argue that once you know a president's personality you *know* everything'.

[23] Cited by Von Drehle, 2008.

[24] *Make America Great Again* is abbreviated to MAGA (Smith, 2020).

[25] Arguably, he is better known for this role in *The Apprentice*—a reality TV programme screened by *NBC* between 2004 and 2015.

would enter the fray with no political experience or background in politics (Frankovic, 2007; Harbaugh, 2015; Johnson, 2011; Krock, 1944)—other than that obtained through the contentious legal and political machinations that inhabit the litigious world of real-estate development in the boroughs of New York City (D'Antonio, 2016, p. 133; Kranish & Fisher, 2017, p. 75; Mahler& Eder, 2016).[26] [27]However, despite his lack of political experience, Trump's celebrity provided him a platform for expressing his political views and, not unusually for someone who had acquired such a high profile he would, from time-to-time, flirt with the tempting proposition of standing for president (D'Antonio, 2016; Kranish and Fisher 2017; Johnson, 2017; O'Brien, 2016).[28] [29]

Trump did not regard a lack of political experience as an impediment to his candidacy, far from it.[30] In fact he would regard it as a virtue (Mayer, 2016). As early as 1988 he stated that 'if I did run for President, I'd win' (Butterfield, 1987). Trump's confidence would appear to be borne of a very particular understanding of politics and the political system: for Trump 'the system' was failing—wrought asunder by a self-interested political class. When interrogated about any sort of issue Trump would conclude with the refrain that America had seen better days. More specifically, it was Trump's contention that politicians were unqualified to undertake the *business* of government—as demonstrated by his argument that America was in decline (Adams, 2015; Byrne, 2015). According to Trump, politics was business by another name—in other words, deal-making (Caminiti, 2017). Logically the best exponent of the deal would be a businessman—someone imbued with a business ethos (Lerer &Colvin, 2016). As Pramuk (2016) explains, Trump regarded himself qualified to become president because if elected he was 'uniquely placed to cut deals.' His message was a simple one: he would transform the country's fortunes precisely because he was not a politician (Ellsworth, 2018).

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[26] In 1973 Trump was the subject of a Justice Department suit for racial bias. The suit alleged racial profiling in the selection of tenants for housing—which invariably led to comment, by Trump, about the politics of the suit and the position of 'welfare recipients' (see: Mahler & Eder, 2016). As Kranish & Fisher state (2017, p. 273), 'Trump was no political naïf'.

[27] It has been reported that over a thirty-year period Trump has been involved in over 3,500 legal actions in federal and state courts—a volume of lawsuits that has been described as unprecedented for a presidential candidate (Prins, 2017).

[28] Trump would, periodically, from the late 1980s onwards, declare an interest in running for president (see: Oreskes, 1987).

[29] Celebrity candidates for president have a long tradition running from Charles A. Lindbergh in the 1930s and 1940s through to Oprah Winfrey whose candidacy has been regularly touted throughout the 1980s and beyond. The political careers of both Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger are illustrative of this phenomenon (it has been suggested that Ventura' populist success as Governor of Minnesota, and as a former prospective candidate for the presidency, were influential on Donald Trump's eventual presidential candidacy (see: Jones, 2018)).

[30] Trump claimed, *'people want me to [run for president] all the time ...'* (Orin,1999).

This was the Trump narrative. He was able to 'present himself as a brawler... unbeholden to any special interest, someone unencumbered by the conventions of Washington' and as 'someone willing to burn down the government on behalf of the governed' (Alberta, 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, as a celebrity businessman, Trump was sought after precisely because he was willing to court controversy by discursively indulging populist tropes and a willingness to flout political correctness. His relationship with the media became mutually beneficial— and has been called 'a dysfunctional co-dependency' because it was built on an indulgence of Trump's reflexive and transgressive views (Kalb, 2017). As the beneficiary of this relationship Trump had a platform to express himself free of political consequences. He had 'entered politics with a pre-existing persona with which... the public had already formed a positive bond: Trump as business leader, celebrity and entertainer... providing a vehicle for his otherwise non-mainstream views to be presented as accessible, acceptable and familiar' (Mollan & Geesin, 2020). Moreover, unlike any other politician, Trump was unconstrained by the conventions of normal political discourse: he was willing to say what he thought precisely because he was unburdened by political rectitude or party discipline and, most importantly, he was unaccountable to any constituency other than himself—a constituency where, as Trump presciently observed, there was no such thing as a bad publicity.[31] He was therefore free to stoke controversy—unfettered by the norms and rules of electoral politics and

> uniquely able to satisfy the imperative of dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle and repeatedly re-entering it, with stories and initiatives that inverted the modern-era distinction between politics and entertainment [hence] transforming notoriety, a brand name, and pop-culture persona into populist hero. (Wells, et al, 2016)

Relishing his notoriety, Trump famously declared 'I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose voters' (Diamond, 2016).[32] According to Kranish and Fisher (2017, p. 98), Trump had acquired 'a populist's penchant for plain talk.' That Trump would become a political phenomenon had a certain inevitability—he traduced norms and was ready to comment on most anything and, together with his celebrity and a press that thrived on controversy, he had a medium from where he could promulgate his political views (Zelizer, 2020, p. 62). Not surprisingly, Trump was able to burnish his self-proclaimed qualities as a business leader who held the solutions to the problems of

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[31] As Trump observed in *The Art of the Deal* (1987, p. 176) 'good publicity is preferable to bad, but from a bottom-line perspective, bad publicity is sometimes better than no publicity at all. Controversy, in short, sells.'

[32] Campaign rally, Sioux Center, IA (23 January 2016).

America—but indeed those of the world (Byrnes, 2015).[33] As Max Abelson (2015) remarks: 'there's no model in the political world for how he transformed himself into a campaign megastar without preparation, politeness, policy, or public service'. As Trump (2004) himself explained 'everything I do in life is framed through the view of a businessman'.

<u>'I Alone Can Fix It'</u>

In his 2016 acceptance speech to the Republican National Convention Donald Trump asserted 'nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix the system' (Applebaum, 2016).[34] His speech was the culmination of thirty years of comment about how the system was failing and how only he, alone, could 'fix it'. In achieving this endeavour, he claimed, 'I am your voice' (Beauchamp, 2016a). Explicit was Trump's now familiar assertion that *only* he understood the problems ailing America and *only* he had the requisite business experience and deal-making nous to address those problems—a Trump characteristic that has been described as a 'propensity to superlative form' (Weiner, 2017). His speech was revealing because it framed Trump's populist arguments—that greatness could be restored simply by putting 'America First' (Larres, 2020). Trump appeared to be suggesting that was not something to be debated (to do so was to engage in the kind of politics that had led America into its present predicament in the first place) rather the electorate had to trust that Trump knew what he was doing because he was a businessman. Trump claimed that he knew *the system* and, as a result, he had identified the problems bedevilling America. It followed therefore that he knew the solutions to the problems he had identified. According to him, Trump's *knowledge* of the system was bound up with his experience as a business mogul. As described earlier, his narrative was simple but effective: the political class could not fix America. The fix lay elsewhere—through the application of business nous, but if voters needed any further reassurance, they need look no further than his corporate record for evidence of how well he'd run the country (Flores, 2016). However, it was never made clear what Trump meant by a *fix*. His 2016 manifesto, *Contract with the American Voter*, makes no mention of him fixing anything. Rather, it states that he will 'work with Congress' to introduce his legislative measures. Furthermore, there is no mention of him or his future administration doing any sort of 'deal'.[35] Beauchamp (2017) explains that 'Trump sees deals as a kind of art.

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[33] '... I think the world would unite if I were the leader of the United States' (Byrnes, 2015).

[34] https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974

[35] His acceptance speech introduced *Donald Trump's Contract with the American Voter* setting out a series of policy proposals that were to be completed within the first one hundred days of his administration. See: https://assets.donaldjtrump.com/_landings/contract/O-TRU-102316-Contractv02.pdf

His life is a creative enterprise of deal making'. Presumably, what Trump means when he claims he alone can fix the system is that politics, like business, is nothing more than a process of negotiated fixes on the way to achieving a deal. In other words, business and politics are the same—something that politicians are unable to understand. However, central to Trump's argument about how he alone would fix the system is an inference that business deals are of a different magnitude to political deals: in effect they are higher form of negotiation—a form of negotiation untrammelled by the kind of political compromise that was endemic to Washington. Logically, or at least so far as Trump was concerned, a successful businessman, would be more than qualified to enter the realms of politics and could do so in anticipation of complete success. Notably, Trump's formulation for political success was to eschew compromise (Klein, 2016). Trump would explain

> I know all of this can be fixed—and it can be fixed quickly. In the world I come from, if something is broken, you fix it. If something doesn't work, you replace it. If a product doesn't deliver, you make a change... It is time for a change. What do you have to lose by trying something new? I will fix it, watch. I will fix it. We have nothing to lose.[36]

We can conclude that for Trump, a business deal was indistinguishable from a political deal. For Trump deal-making was a metaphor for politics—he would be the corrective for a politics that was failing. Not surprisingly, when announcing his candidacy, Trump explained that 'politicians are all talk, no action. Nothing's going to get done'.[37] This was Trump's populist mantra—American fixed; greatness restored, but only if the country chose Donald Trump to solve the country's ills; a narrative he had been honing for the previous thirty years.[38]

According to Trump, deals are always hamstrung by the spectre if not the reality of 'the system'. The system has therefore to be tamed and, if not tamed, it has to be beaten (Trump, 1987, p. 53).[39] The 'system' is another Trump metaphor—while he uses the term indiscriminately more often than not it means a form of corruption. Hence, 'the system is rigged'. For Trump the system is rigged by 'the establishment' (Cullen, 2016). As Trump explained, 'I speak for the people. So, the establishment attacks me. They can't own me, they can't dictate to me, so they search for ways to dismiss me' (2015b, p. 97). As Michael Wolff explains 'Donald Trump's entire life and career were about beating the system (2019, p. 64).

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[36] Campaign in Charlotte, NC, on 18 August 2016.

[37] See full text of speech see *The Washington Post*, June 16th, 2015.

[38] Trump explained in *The Art of the Deal* (1987, p. 1) that 'deals are my art form. Other people paint beautifully on canvas or write wonderful poetry. I like making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks'.

[39] For instance, the term 'winning' appears six times in the first chapter of *Great Again* (2015a). Perhaps not surprisingly, the chapter is titled 'Winning Again'.

Not surprisingly therefore Trump's speeches and interviews are littered with references 'to the system' or 'the establishment' (Perlman, 2016). More importantly however, if a billionaire businessman is thwarted by a system that is rigged then, by implication, the system is rigged against anyone else. For Trump the system represents everything that is wrong with America. It doesn't need to be defined because it's everywhere, embodied by an unaccountable establishment that has wrought economic, social and cultural carnage in its wake. According to Seltzer (2016) Trump was tapping into a feeling among many that

> 'the system has discriminated against and deserted them. So, they've longed for some "Rocky" to represent them: a champion, saviour, hero, or protagonist who'd stand tall and right all their perceived wrongs, or at least provide a voice for their incendiary anger and hatred' (Seltzer, 2016).

And, because Trump 'knows' the system better than anyone else he is the best person to end the carnage, drain the swamp and bring the system to heel hastening 'a national rebirth' (Osborne, 2017, p. 13).

Trump was able to distinguish himself in opposition to the establishment—and, in many respects, his embrace of mainstream media and his obsessive courting of controversy provided him with a platform from which he could extemporise about anything and everything—but more especially about a system that was rigged. Yet, oddly, given Trump's radical prognostications about the state of the country his plans were remarkably conventional and revealed little about his ideological leanings.

Business Trumps Politics

How Donald Trump conducted his business affairs had, not unusually for a presidential candidate, garnered a considerable body of critical comment, However, Trump's claims of success were of a different magnitude. According to Trump, he was extraordinarily well qualified to become president. In 2011, when contemplating a run against President Obama, he gave notice that he was 'running for office in a country that… needs a successful businessman' (Hedegaard, 2011). By 2015 he would claim that 'nobody in the history of the presidency has been as successful as me [in business]' (Greenhouse, 2015). Trump's self-promotion was well documented. Indeed, by the time of his 2015 announcement to seek the nomination of his party, it came as no surprise to hear him claim immodestly, and with bullish optimism, that he 'would be the greatest jobs president… ever' (ibid). And, burnishing his business credentials further, he would contend that 'our country needs a truly great leader… we need a leader who wrote *The Art of the Deal*'.[40] As one commentator noted—

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[40] Tony Schwartz, Trump's co-author and an established journalist, contests Trump's claim to have been the author of *The Art of the Deal*. See: Schwartz, 2017. Also, Mayer, 2016.

perhaps ironically—if elected Trump would be a 'flawless dealmaker and a masterful manager' (Abelson, 2015). As Trump would rhetorically opine: what was there to lose (Gass, 2016)?[41]

While all presidential candidates engage in hyperbole Donald Trump went to considerable lengths to portray himself as someone who was qualified to meet 'any presidential task' (D'Antonio, 2016, p. 448).[42] In effect, Trump was claiming to be a wholly different kind of presidential candidate. As Leo Seltzer (2016) explains, he was someone who was going to deploy his 'business cunning, superior intelligence and ruthlessness' to fix the country and the political system. What he was not going to do was waste time engaging in the failed politics of his predecessors. Trump was different; he appeared to be different and sounded different (Golshan, 2016; Goldhill, 2017).

In his 2012 campaign for the presidency Mitt Romney suggested that a provision be included in the Constitution requiring any presidential candidate to have spent 'at least three years in business before he could become president' (Illing, 2017).[43] Mitt Romney makes an important point—one which Trump would echo relentlessly in his campaign speeches—that a background solely founded in politics does not itself prepare a candidate to become president. In effect, Romney was arguing against the rise of the party apparatchik— politicians who were corrupted by what Trump would describe as 'the swamp'. However, Romney's broader point was that experience in business—especially managing a large administrative conglomerate—was comparable to the challenges presented by the presidency and therefore the type of exacting environment from where candidates should be drawn (Spector, 2017; Dewar, et al, 2016).[44] As one political journalist explained 'inheriting the keys to American government is akin to a succession at *General Electric* or *Microsoft*' (Lane, 2017). Indeed Bert Spector (2017) makes the same point explaining that there are 'many traits of an effective CEO [chief executive officer] that could serve a president well: transparency and accountability, responsiveness to internal governance, and commitment to the interest of the overall corporation'.[45] For Lane (2017) the similarities do not end there—

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[41] Trump directed this question to black voters.

[42] A legacy of Donald Trump's courting of the media.

[43] Why three years would equip a candidate to become president is not made clear.

[44] Before entering politics, Romney was chief executive officer (CEO—see the following footnote, below) of *Bain Capital*—a multinational venture-capital company. After Bain he became CEO of the organising committee for the 2002 Olympic and Paralympic Games before later becoming Governor of Massachusetts (2003 – 07).

[45] A chief executive officer (CEO) is the highest-ranking executive in a company, whose primary responsibilities include making major corporate decisions, managing the overall operations and

to succeed a president should have 'clear goals', 'define bedrock functions' by 'refocusing structures, processes, and human capital' on the administration's 'core mission and goals'. Presumably, these were just some of the characteristics Romney regarded as desirable in an executive.[46] However, in arriving at this formulation it was unlikely that he had a businessman like Donald Trump in mind—someone he once described as having 'neither the temperament nor judgement to be president' (O'Keefe, 2016). Romney was, more likely, thinking of someone similar to himself—someone who had a history of working in the corporate sector and who had transitioned from business to politics with effortless ease (Webber, 2012)[47] Unlike Donald Trump, whose temperament and judgement Romney would call into doubt, Romney embodied a certain type of businessman—often described as 'patrician' (Kotkin, 2012)—for whom public service was a selfless act of civic duty (Saveth, p. 251, 1963).[48] [49]

Romney's argument was that Trump was, in his words, 'a phony' who knew nothing about business and who was far from successful (O'Keefe, 2016). Romney's criticism of Trump had considerable traction among commentators—and attracted much comment. Spector (2017) makes it abundantly clear that 'Trump wasn't a genuine CEO…. he didn't run a major public corporation with shareholders and a board of directors that could hold him to account'. In fact, business analysts have unfavourably described the Trump Organisation as a small family-run business in terms of size (Kruse, 2016a).[50] This criticism was not unreasonable. For example, Sean Illing (2017), commenting on the parochial style of management,

resources of a company, acting as the main point of communication between the board of directors (the board) and corporate operations and being the public face of the company. A CEO is elected by the board and shareholders (see: https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/ceo.asp)

[46] None of which are particular unusual, and no doubt are the desired characteristics sensibly sought of in any leader.

[47] The relationship between Trump and Romney became one of mutual antipathy—following Trump's inauguration (for a brief history of the relationship see for example Cullen, 2021, at https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/01/07/metro/donald-trump-mitt-romney-politics-humility/)

[48] Trump had endorsed Romney's 2012 bid for the presidency, see: https:///www.cbsnews.com/8301-trump=endorses-mitt-romney-for-president/. However, after Trump's election Romney became a leading critic of the president. See: https://www/teguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/mitt-romney-senate-run-trump-critic).

[49] Romney's father, George W. Romney, had been chairman and president of the American Motors Corporation, the 43rd Governor of Michigan and then latterly Secretary of HUD in the Nixon administration. By any measure, he was both wealthy and well connected and could readily be described as a member of the 'patrician class'.

[50] Some critics have referred to the Trump Organisation's parochial management structure as a 'mom and pop entity' (Kruse, 2017a); as 'clannish' and 'crude' (The Economist, 2016) and as a 'teenager's fantasy of adult office power' (Abelson, 2015).

describes the Trump Organisation as nothing more than an 'extension of the owner'. Michael Wolff is equally critical, explaining that Trump's 'entire life was spent as the head of what was in essence a small family operation, one designed to do what he wanted and to bow to his style of doing business' (2019, p. 41). Furthermore, Spector (2017) cautions that 'running a family business isn't the same as running a public corporation' much less can it be compared to running the sprawling apparatus of government that is the presidency.

As discussed previously, Trump relies on his own measures of success to reinforce the narrative that he is qualified to be president. However, in business terms, this is far from the case. For example, in terms of capitalisation, market share or employee numbers, to name but three criteria, the Trump Organisation is not as successful as is claimed, much less could it be described as *a large corporation* (Blanding, 2011).[51] This was reflected by a parlous credit score which was reported as 19 out of 100, some 30 points below the national average—according to Woodward (2018, p. 58). Furthermore, the Trump Organisation has none of the usual economies of scale associated with a large publicly traded corporation (Swanson, 2016).[52] Tellingly, the Trump Organisation is not among *The Financial Times Global 500* list of the world's leading companies (Neidig, 2016).[53] For example, Twohey, et al, (2016) explain that the Trump Organisation '... adheres to few formal corporate guidelines [or] standardised procedures.' Trump's unconventional approach to business management and corporate governance is revealing: the Trump Organisation does not rely on business development strategies; utilise balance sheets or organisational charts much less make use of consolidated financial reports and business plans—all of which are regarded as integral components in the smooth running and success of a business (O'Brien, 2016, p. 99; Kranish & Fisher, 2017; Kruse, 2016b; Woodward, 2018, p. 236).

Moreover, where major corporations are defined by their hierarchical structure—a structure that reinforces corporate governance—the Trump Organisation, contrastingly, favours a 'flat' management structure where a small group of employees report directly to Donald Trump

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[51] The Trump Organisation employs 4000 people approximately—most of whom are in the service sector (Twohey, et al, 2016).

[52] The Trump Organisation does not feature among the top ten largest real-estate companies in New York City, let alone the United States. The Trump Organisation website describes the business as comprising a 'luxury real-estate portfolio'. The portfolio includes a chain of hotels, golf courses, private jet rentals, beauty pageants and even bottled water.

[53] The companies are ranked by *market capitalisation*—the market value of a publicly traded company. The most valuable companies are, for example, Apple, Microsoft, Exxon, etc.

(The Economist, 2016; Spector, 2017; Kruse, 2016a). [54] [55] This approach to management is certainly consistent with Trump's assertion that he 'didn't like answering to a board of directors' but is nevertheless inconsistent with the high level of strategic planning and management that characterises large and successfully run corporations—or indeed the presidency of the United States (O'Brien, p. 83; Kruse, 2016b).[56]

Furthermore, as a Limited Liability Company (LLC) the Trump Organisation is distinguished by the fact it has no shareholders. Therefore, regardless of Trump's claims to the contrary, his business cannot be favourably compared with a public corporation. [57] [58] [59] Public corporations are subject to stringent compliance and regulatory oversight by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) because of the fiduciary responsibilities they owe to their shareholders.[60] This is especially important because, as Spector (2017) notes, 'transparency…enables accountability'. The Trump Organisation however, as an LLC, is not subject to SEC oversight (Larson, 2018). The absence of real and meaningful transparency has led business analysts to damningly describe the Trump Organisation as an operation that runs 'on a culture of Trump' (Twohey, et al, 2016). A culture that 'has not created a great company' according to an article from *The Economist* (2016).

Indeed, much of the criticism levelled at Donald Trump and his approach to business can be located in his aversion to scrutiny.[61] Kranish and Fisher (2017, p. 121) comment that in the Trump Organisation transparency was at best opaque and success unrelated to matters of scrutiny and transparency but was instead 'defined—and created—in good measure by reputation and image.' No doubt this was because the enterprise operated in what Wolff describes as a 'lightly regulated market' (2016, p. 24). *The Economist* (2016) scathingly

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[54] The SEC requires CEOs, who are subject to an array of restraints—unlike the CEO of a LLC, to make full and public disclosures of their company's financial positions—requiring disclosures of operating expenses, significant partnerships, liabilities, strategies, risks and plans (Spector, 2017).

[55] Michael Kruse (2016b) describes 'a core group of barely more than a dozen executives.'

[56] An interviewer noted that 'although there is a boardroom there is no board' (Kruse, 2017a).

[57] Limited liability companies (LLC) are hybrid entities that combine the characteristics of a corporation with those of a partnership or sole proprietorship. See: investopedia.com.

[58] The terms *public corporation* and *public company* are used interchangeable.

[59] For a definition of a *public corporation*, see: https://www.law.cornell.law.edu/wex/public corporation-definition.

[60] The SEC is a federal body.

[61] In legal terms LLCs are subject to state law as opposed to federal law—which explains why the SEC has no oversight function with regard to the Trump Organisation.

reported that Trump had, as a result, become 'a veteran of publicity but not of scrutiny'. As one journalist concluded after an examination of Donald Trump's business dealings:

> there's precious little about the Trump Organization that provides the kind of experience that it takes to run the [government] in America… there's no known board of directors, no outside shareholders and no real customer base… it's far closer to running a family office than running Wal-Mart (Lane, 2017).[62]

Michael Wolff explains that

> even though Trump liked to portray his business as an empire, it was actually a discrete holding company and boutique enterprise, catering more to his peculiarities as proprietor… than to any bottom line or other performance measures (2018, p. 38).

According to Bob Woodward, Trump has never 'been in a business where he had to do long term strategic thinking (2018, p. 337).

When judged by his own measures of what it takes to be a successful president Trump fails to meet the bar he set himself—that is to say, his idiosyncratic management style, his lack of experience and his unfamiliarity running a complex organisation were at odds with the narrative of a successful businessman he had been propounding over the past thirty years. Political journalist Dylan Matthews (2017) explains why Trump is not the business success he claims, according to his analysis Trump's

> vision of the world [that is] based on his own limited and blinkered experience of the business world, one that mistakes the absolute worst, most dysfunctional parts of the American economy for the way the entire world works.

Trump's success in otherwise procuring a perception to the contrary was borne out by a survey in which a significant majority described him as 'a successful businessman' (Frankovic, 2017) [63] who led 'an enormous, diversified organisation that is worth billions' (Fridersdorf, 2015). As Bradlee (2018) reports Trump 'was able to leverage his celebrity into a brand… a brand that suggested success' (p. 155).

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[62] This criticism is compounded by a series of bankruptcies that resulted from Trump's one attempt to manage a publicly traded corporation—a series of bankruptcies that have been described as an 'unmitigated disaster' (Spector, 2017) and a 'debacle' (Illing, 2017) and which critics cite as evidence of Trump's inability to manage in a complex business environment—much less manage an organisation as complex as the government of the United States (D'Antonio, 2016; Swanson, 2016).

[63] According to a survey conducted in June 2017, 55% agreed with the proposition that Trump was 'a successful businessman' (Frankovic, 2017).

<u>Conclusion</u>

Whatever the realities were about his business Trump steadfastly proclaimed his success, never wavering from anything but the most subjective and overblown reading of his qualifications. But, as Bob Woodward (2018, p. 115) perceptively discerned underlying this narrative was a subtext arising from Trump's compulsion to always cast himself *in opposition*—indeed Woodward describes it as Trump's 'bedrock principle.' Michael Wolff (2018, p. 40) shares Woodward's analysis, describing Trump as 'reflexive naysayer.' It follows that if you are in opposition success becomes hard won—or at least is perceived to be so. This is because business was a transactional, zero-sum game—for Trump it was the equivalent of Hobbes' 'war of all against all' (Schnurer, 2017).[64] As Tony Schwartz (2017) explains, Trump saw himself '[operating] in a jungle full of predators who were forever out to get him, a jungle that required him to do what he had to do just to survive'. Not surprisingly, Trump's approach to business was informed by a cynicism about people's motives: 'you can't respect people because most people aren't worthy of respect', he is reported to have said on different occasions (D'Antonio, 2017, p. 326; Wolff, 2018, p. 289).

Accordingly, in interviews and through his books Trump has, over the years, cultivated a perception of himself as an embattled 'outsider' for whom business success was obtained against the odds and, invariably, at the expense of the 'establishment'. But, exactly why Trump adopted this narrative is difficult to explain but what is clear is that he embraced and embellished these stories over a considerable time, shaping them to fit the narrative of the outsider versus the establishment. This extended to his politics—where he cautioned that 'the world is a pretty vicious place' (Fussman, 2004). His adoption of the role of 'outsider' appears to have been less a conscious decision and more the consequence of courting controversy for its own sake (Parnes, 2018).[65] Thus, he was able to define himself by what he was against—which was failure and failure, according to Trump's logic, could be located squarely with a political and business establishment that was 'overentitled and under deserving' and, by definition, corrupt (Frum, 2017, p. 29). As Trump ominously explained to

[64] The following quotes are illustrative of Trump's approach to business: 'I'm not big on compromise... but oftentimes compromise is the equivalent of defeat, and I don't like being defeated' (Kruse & Weiland, 2016); 'The worst thing you can possibly do in a deal is to seem desperate to make it. That makes the other guy smell blood, and then you're dead' (Trump, 1987, p. 53) or 'We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let's say, China in a trade deal? They kill us' (https://washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid).

[65] The general consensus among his biographers is Trump suffers from an inferiority complex who, paradoxically, in seeking the approval of those he admires, manages only to alienate himself—thereby compounding his sense of inferiority and alienation (D'Antonio, 2017, p. 3). Michael Wolff (2018) described Trump as 'a rebel without a cause' (p. 4).

Carl Fussman (2004) 'I knew where the world was going' and if the world was to be saved it needed someone who was willing to take on the establishment. As an outsider he was able to 'speak out' and, by implication, speak 'the truth' thereby traducing received wisdom—whether it is about business or politics: he was the ultimate controvert: an insider who was an outsider.

Moreover, according to Trump he was different—both as a businessman and as a putative politician because he had the business skills, the experience and the attributes of a successful CEO but, unlike other CEOs—who, like politicians, were beholden to and creatures of the establishment—he was willing to flout the rules to make the deals that nobody else could—and, according to Trump, this was what a 'real chief executive' did (Stewart, 2017). A real chief executive was willing to buck the system.

When Trump claims that only he can 'fix the system' he is asserting that he is different—in his own prolix way—because only he can repair the broken system (Reicher & Haslam, 2017) For Trump, being different was important in other ways, not least because it provided him with a platform, and a pseudo credo, from where he could proselytise about what it meant to be an 'outlier' (Hunston, 2017). As a negotiator he claimed to 'know the system' and, importantly, knowing the system, or the process, meant being able to forge solutions—which, of course, the establishment were unable to achieve. As he explained in *Trump: How to Get Rich* (2004): 'in business, every business, the bottom line is understanding the process' (p. 86). Trump's rending of what constitutes a successful businessman is telling. As a successful businessman he was *in* the establishment, but he was not *of* the establishment. This allowed him to distinguish himself as incomparably successful because he did things his *own* way, unencumbered by the establishment—or the system. The implication was that he played by a different set of rules as only an 'outsider' could (Newport & Saad, 2016). Trump explained that his experiences had resulted in him becoming 'very anti-establishment because I understand the system [better] than anybody else' (Blake, 2016). Trump's experience was of a system that embraced incremental change, where corruption was rife and where the rules stacked in favour of the establishment.

Trump's perception of himself is of a businessman who has always been 'wronged' by the system and by the establishment (Dowd, 2021). Trump's ethos had a simple and irrefutable logic to it: I am a rich and successful businessman despite the system—this makes me an outsider; if an outsider can be successful in the demanding world of business they can succeed in the far less demanding world of politics—if you don't believe me look at the mess the politicians are making; the establishment knows this, and they will oppose me wherever they can.

The echoes of these themes can be located in his 2015 presidential bid announcement—which would thereafter form the core of his election strategy. Michael Kruse (2020) describes Trump as 'an insurgent outsider'. According to Street (2018, p. 11) once Trump had secured his clarion status as an 'outsider' his entry into politics was all but inevitable. Reciher and Haslam (2017) go so far as to describe Trump as 'an entrepreneur of identity'. In fulminating against the establishment Trump became the voice of those who were disaffected by politics and government.

So, in effect, the establishment would be anyone or anything that thwarted Trump—by rigging the system against him (Rucker & Leonnig, 2020, p. 416; Woodward, 2018, p. 5). At a campaign rally in 2016 Trump would declare: 'I'm an outsider fighting for you'.[66] This became Trump's iconoclastic narrative, one which he would hone until the concept of 'the establishment' had metamorphosed to the point where the term meant whatever he wanted it to mean—be it the 'dark state', 'the swamp' or the 'beltway'.[67] It was for precisely this reason that his views were sought. He appeared ready and able to cut through the complexity that adhered to any political question to offer simple and compelling solutions. For Trump, the failure of the political class—as embodied by the liberal establishment—was just as easily explained: they had an interest in corrupting the political process by complicating what could easily be remedied.

The extent to which Donald Trump's past life in business influenced his approach to politics cannot be understated. Dylan Matthews (2017) offers this analysis:

> For Donald Trump calling someone a loser is not merely an insult, and calling someone a winner is not merely a compliment. The division of the world into those who win and those who lose is of paramount philosophical importance to him, the clearest reflection of his deep, abiding faith that the world is a zero-sum game, and you can only gain if someone else is failing.

It is not disputed that as a businessman Trump was able to inveigh himself into the political arena because of his zealous cultivation of the media—the only prerequisite was that he flouted convention and stoked controversy, which he would do with a flourish. The more contentious his views the more likely he was to generate copy. He had certainly mastered the

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[66] Campaign speech at the Suburban Collection Showpiece, Novi, Michigan, 30th September 2016 (see: https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2-16/10/01/donald-trump-novi-michigan-rally-campaign/913882940/)

[67] According to a paper by Ruth Wodak (2017) populist politicians continuously define and redefine terms, such as *the establishment*, in different ways. This means anyone could potentially be included or excluded (p.556). For an early attempt to define 'the establishment' in American politics see Phyllis Schlafly's (1964), *A Choice Not An Echo*. Schlafly describes the Establishment (with a capital E) as an affiliation of conspirators who, in their self-appointed role as 'Kingmakers', surreptitiously influence important matters i.e. the choice of president.

art of being controversial. In his ruminations on the state of the country, and more especially the economy—a subject Trump felt he was particularly qualified to comment on—he offered simple but trenchant answers. As David Smith (2021) explains he had 'an eye for the politics of theatre'. However, despite an insatiable desire to impart his views, Trump's contributions to the political debate rarely rose to anything more than repetition of simplistic populist tropes to what were complex questions. His politics was informed by a simple logic: i) you have to beat the establishment; ii) I have beaten the establishment iii) therefore winning is everything. It is conceivable that this was all a business career in real estate had to teach and it was certainly something Trump embraced.

And, hitherto, he was accountable to no one but himself, so it mattered little that his answers were sometimes contradictory, sometimes ill-considered and more often plain offensive. By taking on the establishment, he was speaking truth to power—even if he was a political chameleon. What business had taught him was that the means justified the end. By this formulation it was perfectly acceptable to renege on deals—providing you are winning, by any means. He is therefore a pragmatist albeit his brand of pragmatism is more like a labyrinth, where words mean what they mean when Trump says them. In this respect he lives in the present. His political positions are located in the moment—his books, where they reflect Trump's thinking on social and political matters, are marked by their incoherence. His inclination to what David Garrow (2020) describes as 'vacuous logorrhoea' is revealing. In effect, he has no political hinterland. For Trump there were no shades of grey—political issues, like business deals, were simple, easily explicable and just as readily solvable. According to Trump's simple and unconventional calculus an issue had simply to be reduced to its constituent parts: who gets what and for what price? In other words, the language of politics needed to be recalibrated—by the simple application of his business nous. Trump appeared to be arguing for a political reordering: shed politics of complexity by taking the politics out of politics and a deal was there to be made.

It appears odd therefore that despite his presidential ambitions Trump felt no need to elaborate on his politics and, where he did elaborate, he revealed no strong ideological ties. Whether this was deliberate is not known. According to Benjamin Page (Campbell, 1983, p. 284)[68] this is not unusual, as he explains: 'the most striking feature about a candidates' rhetoric about policy is its vagueness'. It appears somewhat paradoxical that despite Trump's celebrity remarkably little was known about his politics. Professor Victor Davis Hanson, a noted conservative and highly regarded author of *The Case for Trump* (2020a), would

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[68] See also: Page, 1976, p. 142

explain that 'Trump was not ideologically driven' (p. 381). If this is the case, then what does it say about our understanding of Trumpism?

We might suppose that a businessman with no previous experience of politics would subscribe to a political ideology, but Trump came to the presidency by defining himself by what he was against. His solutions to what was wrong were to ask the electorate to trust in his acumen as a businessman and nothing more. Consequently, it would be a difficult case to make convincingly that Trump subscribed to a discernible political philosophy. Indeed, his views, if anything, reflected an incurable penchant for improvision—as his run for the presidency would reveal. No doubt Trump believed himself to be a success, but the evidence strongly suggests that his business background provided him with little or no experience of what was required to succeed as president. It could be argued that a candidate for president must have at least one of these two requirements: experience or a strong ideological belief in what needs to be done and how it is to be achieved if he or she is to be a success—Trump had neither which would be reflected by his presidency. As Giles Smith (2017) asks 'it is not whether America can be run like a company, but whether it can be run the way Trump runs a company'.

The aim of the chapter was to examine if Donald Trump's earlier life, particularly his business background, might provide us with some understanding about his political beliefs which in turn would underpin his policy positions. However, there is frustratingly little evidence that he is ideologically driven. His business background is revealing of someone for whom everything was opportunistic and short-term. As such, Trumpism appears to mean whatever Donald Trump means it to mean which is why his supporters and his critics have sought to define the concept in his stead, as the following chapters will attempt to explain.

Chapter 2

An ideology or else a political philosophy would provide the much-needed evidential basis from which to understand Trump, his politics and indeed Trumpism—however, with Trump, this is far from straight forward. The difficulty is that Trump does not subscribe to a discernible political philosophy—as explained in the previous chapter. In this regard he is a phenomenon, and this has left scholars and commentators to speculate about what Trump and Trumpism means. This chapter proceeds therefore on an assumption that Trump is not an ideologue. Indeed, many of Trump's supporters would agree with that proposition yet, interestingly, they have sought other ways to explain Trump—variously arguing, for example, that he is an incarnation and the heir to President Andrew Jackson. Others on the right have contended that Trump is a political realist (Hansin, 2020a) while for some Trump is a political pragmatist (Gingrich, 2020). These labels reflect the Trump phenomenon—what inheres to these different attempts to explain and contextualise Trump is an imperative to explain Trump.

This chapter's first objective is to examine these claims by asking if Trump is the heir to Andrew Jackson and the Jacksonian tradition.

Schier and Eberly (2016) define an ideology as 'a set of fundamental beliefs or principles about politics and government: what the scope of government should be; how decisions should be made; what values should be pursued' (p. 2).[69] For them, an ideology is concerned with 'the grand issues of politics' (ibid). For Harper and Schaaf (2018) an ideology comprises 'ideas for transforming institutions or cultures through political mechanisms' (p. 259). As Cormier (2016) explains an ideology is a matter of having 'fixed principles ordaining a pre-specified *summum bonum*'.

By examining the politics of Donald Trump from these different perspectives—the chapter represents an effort to obtain some understanding of what Trumpism means. It will be argued that Trumpism is an abstract and, as an abstract, it has come to exemplify Trump's politics. It could be argued that Trump's only contribution to Trumpism would be to lend his name to the concept. Peter Katzenstein (2019) maintains that 'Trumpism is not the same as Trump'. What Katzenstein meant was that Trump was a vessel for neo-conservatives to co-opt (Sargent, 2021).[70] Trumpism presents as something of an essentially contested concept—

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[69] The authors attribute this definition to Flanigan, W. & Zingale, N. in their book *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, (2010, 12th ed.), Washington, DC: CQ Press, p. 135.

[70] For example, according to Joshua Green (2017), Steve Bannon, the right-wing political strategist who in the latter days of the 2016 election would become chief executive of the Trump campaign, had been 'searching for a vessel for his populist-nationalist ideas' (p. 21).

a concept that others have sort to define, as will be explained. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Trump's interest in Trumpism would start and end with the presence of his name—another of his many brands—his interest in the concept thereafter was ephemeral and fleeting.[71]

The chapter's premise is a simple one: Donald Trump entered the campaign to be President of the United States without a real understanding of the political and philosophical dilemmas and complexities of power that inhere to the presidency. Moreover, for someone who had harboured presidential ambitions, he displayed a remarkable lack of interest in acquiring the knowledge that he would need to succeed as president. Charles Cooke (2020), a right-wing political commentator, characterises Donald Trump as follows:

> I think that he's a shallow, ignorant, capricious, incorrigible, self-destructive fool. For a while, I was convinced that he would change. If he became the nominee, he'd change. In the final stretch of the election, he'd change. Once he had won, he'd change. After the inauguration, he'd change. Having settled into the role, he'd change. But he didn't, because he can't. This is who he is, and who he has always been. Most people walk around the White House and feel the weight of history pressing down upon their shoulders. Lincoln's eyes follow them around the room and Washington's name slows their tongue. The building itself intimidates. But not Trump. For all the effect his surroundings have had on him, he may as well work from the parking lot outside of a Denny's.

It is widely acknowledged that Trump entered the 2016 presidential race with a rudimentary understanding of politics and the political process—and, importantly, free of ideological baggage. As Sherman and Palmer (2020) explain, Trump's 'governing philosophy was simple: muscle and mouth' (p. 45). In some regards this would be a virtue: the electorate saw him as a disruptive force, someone who would speak truth to power, untainted by party politics or ideology. However, once elected, these perceived virtues—such as they were, would, paradoxically, become the source of his failings (Landler, 2017; Wagner, Paletta & Sullivan, 2017; Goldmacher, 2017; Phillip & Wagner, 2017).[72] The reasons for this are explored here. The chapter will argue that Trump's failure to harness the levers of government can be located in the fact that his policies lacked an ideological underpinning. It is here, that the Trump presidency can be understood. As Corey Robin (2018) explains the 'failure to enact the most basic parts of [Trump's] platform... [was] a sign of incoherence' (p.

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[71] Daniel Henninger (2021) explains that Trump regards himself as 'the personification of Trumpism'. Trumpism is 'l'etat, c'est moi'.

[72] The reader might take issue with the depiction of the Trump presidency as a failure—this argument is dealt with elsewhere but the fact that Trump was unable to win a second term must, of itself, would amount to a failure (See for example: Glasser, 2021).

xiii). As this chapter argues, that incoherence was an ideological incoherence that could be located at the centre of the administration and was attributable to the president himself.

In addition, while Donald Trump's policies and pronouncements may have all the hallmarks of a populist politician, it remains the case that we know very little about Trump's formative political thinking. This paucity of information, about someone who we think we know so much about, is striking (Trump, M., 2020, p. 16). Politically, despite everything that has been written about Trump he remains something of an enigma as Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms (2017) explain in the preface to their book, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View*. According to them, 'the world hungers for information on, and an understanding of, Donald Trump' (p. xi). They explain that there is 'no monograph that explores the coherence of Trump's views over time or examines them in their proper historical context' (op cit). This lacuna in our knowledge is not just remarkable, given all that has been written about Trump and, latterly, about his presidency, but it may go some way to explain why Trump has become the subject of so much analysis and critical reflection.[73] While Trump has been a prodigious commentator on the state of America and more especially the state of the economy, his commentaries provide little or no understanding about why he has adopted the views he has so energetically espoused.[74] We appear to know everything about him and nothing—in this respect it could be argued that Trump is nothing more than a quasi-fictional character of his own self-invention. As James Naughtie (2020, p.195) noted: 'no president has ever opened the workings of his mind to the people as Trump has done, and evidence of this kind of thinking emerges almost hourly' yet, unusually, at least for someone so conspicuously in the public eye and who had courted controversy with such unrelenting gusto, we know little about Trump's formative political thinking—indeed as late as 2012 Trump was, according to Joshua Green (2017, p. 105), still 'feeling his way towards a political identity'. Curiously, Trump has never elaborated on who or what may have influenced him politically, much less has he provided any detailed insight about his thinking, despite once stating '[that] I feel I have been in politics all my life' (Nagourney, 1999). In sum, he has been unusually reticent about his development as a politician. Trump's books, three of which are political tracts, do not help. Indeed Dylan Matthews (2017) explains that trying to make

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[73] See for example Carlos Lozada's (2020c) book, *What Were We Thinking: A Brief Intellectual History of the Trump Era*, for a discussion about the many books and articles that have been written about Trump and, more especially, the efforts to understand Trump, his life, his politics and the wider Trump phenomenon.

[74] Trump's extensive bibliography predates his later use of Twitter. Trump's first recorded Tweet was on May 4th, 2009, according to Pain and Chen (2019). Trump's use of Twitter has been subject to much scholarly analysis (see for example Wells, et al, 2016). However, this paper focuses primarily on Trump's speeches and writings and, more especially so, because the Trump bibliography predates his later use of Twitter.

sense of Trump's books is a 'fool's errand' because 'the books contradict each other frequently and often contradict themselves'. So, in many regards, Trump makes for an unusual and challenging study. This challenge is exemplified by Trump's contradictory admission that 'I have been very much an open book. I mean, one thing, people know who I am. While I haven't been public, I am public' (Kendzior, 2020, p. 101).

<u>Trump and Andrew Jackson</u>

It is argued by Donald Trump's supporters that his politics most closely resemble those of President Andrew Jackson (Hohmann, 2016). Indeed, the similarities do appear compelling—which might explain why Trump has been reviled and lauded in equal measure (Ryan, 2019). Presidential historians, Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese (2009, p. 64) make the point that Jackson's legacy was marked by controversy and division, so it is perhaps hardly surprising why Trump has been compared to Jackson.[75]

Jackson, like Trump, is often described as an outsider who ran against the political elite of the day—so defying political convention (Critchlow, 2018, p. 39). For example, Holland and Fermor (2021, p. 65) describe Trump has embodying 'the quintessence of the Jacksonian tradition.' They maintain that Jacksonianism and Trumpism are comparable—because, according to their analysis, both are defined by:

> an unabashed military populism, centred on an ethos of pride and respect; a desire to avoid war unless threatened or attacked; clear scepticism of existing international trade and legal agreements; and a general disinterest in issues of human rights, democracy promotion, and nation building abroad (ibid, p. 67).

Considering Trump's campaign pronouncements, his self-regarding personality and his various interventions and comments over the years preceding his election, there was much to commend this comparison with President Jackson. In addition, Trump is oftentimes described as a nationalist and a populist—labels that were also attributed to Jackson. Historians Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms (2017) make the same comparison—in doing so they draw heavily on the work of Walter Russell Mead.[76] They explain that the intellectual roots of Trumpism can be located in Mead's revival of Jackson (pp. 7 – 16). They describe Trump's politics as 'a concoction of nationalist, nativist, protectionist, populist,

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[75] Jackson regularly ranks in the top twenty of American Presidents. Available at: https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/presidents-ranked-worst-best/27/

[76] See Mead: 'The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy' (1999) and 'The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order' (2017).

isolationist and militarist elements' that, in their analysis, can be traced back to and have echoes in the policies and politics of Andrew Jackson (ibid, p. 8). They contend that:

> Jacksonians are focused on safeguarding the physical security and economic welfare of the American nation against those it regards as its enemies at home and abroad. They have a populist suspicion of the elite establishment, who they regard as insufficiently patriotic and more concerned with abstract cosmopolitan ideals than prioritising the citizens of their own nation. They have little interest in ensuring the spread of democracy or capitalist values around the world and, in general, are little concerned with foreign affairs (ibid, p. 9).

In a paper titled *The Jacksonian Revolt* (2017) Mead explained why he regarded Trump as the successor to the Jacksonian mantle. According to Mead:

> the most powerful driver of Jacksonian political engagement in domestic politics [...] is the perception that Jacksonians are being attacked by internal enemies, such as an elite cabal or immigrants from different backgrounds. Jacksonians worry about the U.S. government being taken over by malevolent forces bent on transforming the United States' essential character (p. 2).

However, as compelling as these comparisons might be, it is important to note that until Steve Bannon joined the campaign in its later stages, there is no evidence that Trump was knowingly referencing Jackson much less did he regard himself as Jackson's political heir (Hylton, 2017; Johnson & Tumulty, 2017). Rather, as historians sought to comprehend Trump's idiosyncratic rise, comparisons began to be made with Jackson, as Susan Glasser (2018) explains. According to Glasser, the comparisons provided an 'intellectual framework [from which] to understand Trump at a time when others remained simply mystified by [him]'. Glasser writes that it was not until late into the campaign, following the appointment of Steve Bannon, that Trump began to draw comparisons between himself and Jackson.[77] According to Glasser, Bannon saw Jackson as 'a populist kindred spirit—and a suitably rabble-rousing model for the anti-establishment course he hoped Trump would follow' (ibid). Indeed, Bannon would explain that his relationship with Trump derived from his capacity to formulate Trump's feelings and emotions into a policy agenda (Harrington &Haddan, 2020, p. 203). Glasser's explanation accords with the evidence: until Bannon's appointment Trump was not given to citing Jackson in his books or speeches—it can be assumed that *had* Trump been aware of the similarities he either failed to make the

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[77] In August 2016 Bannon was appointed to the role of Chief Executive Officer of the Trump 2016 Presidential Campaign. Bannon is described as a right-wing ideologue and political strategist who, after the election, would serve for seven months as Counsellor to the President and Chief Strategist in the Trump administration.

connection or chose not to, both of which are unlikely given his later enthusiastic embrace of Jackson (Lizza, 2017; Nichols, 2016).[78]

Joshua Green (2017) makes a similar point.[79] According to Green, Bannon saw 'Trump as the avatar of an-us-versus-them populism that could galvanize the electorate' (p. 6). However, without an 'intellectual basis' and a campaign that was 'guided almost entirely by [Trump's] impulses' (ibid, p. 208 & p. 209, the question was how to explain Trump and Trumpism when, as Green details, 'Trump was not a serious candidate' (ibid, p. 21).[80] Green suggests that Bannon similarly realised that without 'a fully formed, internally coherent worldview Trump would not... become president' (ibid, p. 46). Jonathan Chait (2017) argues that Bannon's intent was to 'establish a populist identity for the administration'. As Sargent (2021) explains, Bannon saw Trump as 'a "vessel" for his insurgency'. Bannon would, argues Hemmer (2022, p. 53), 'arm Trump with something like a cohesive political platform'. This analysis of Trump has echoes elsewhere. Woodward (2017, p. 127) writes that the challenge for strategists as well as political writers and historians was how to rend Trump's 'string of one sentence clichés' into something that was politically and philosophically comprehensible. Green explains that to achieve this Bannon would exhume 'the nationalist thinkers of an earlier age... to build an intellectual basis for Trumpism' (ibid, p. 208). In so doing, Bannon would draw on an earlier paper authored by Mead (1999) titled *The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy* to provide the intellectual heft and explanatory framework that Trump lacked (Feller, 2021, p. 671). Bannon is reported to have explained that 'like Jackson's populism, we're going to build an entirely new political movement' (Wolff, 2016). According to Jarvis (2018), Bannon made a crucial distinction between himself and Trump: Bannon regarded himself as a populist—someone with a developed philosophy whereas Trump, contrastingly, was a *popularist*—in other words, Trump was schooled in the art of 'demagogic sophistry'. The distinction is important—as a sophist Trump was, as Jarvis (2018) argues, interested only in power for its own sake (p. 196). Bannon was seeking to translate Trump's populist claims, like '*drain the swamp*, into meaningful and lasting policy, such as *the deconstruction of the administrative state*' (ibid). If Jarvis is correct, then the

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[78] Trump claims to be the author of nineteen books. However, only three books have a specifically political content: *The America We Deserve* (2000), *Time to Get Tough* (2011) and *Great Again* (2015). Like many politicians the books were published as precursors to a prospective presidential campaign. For example, Hillary Clinton would, as part of her 2016 presidential campaign, publish a book titled *Stronger Together: A Blueprint for America's Future*.

[79] Green provides a detailed study of the relationship between Bannon and Donald Trump in his widely acclaimed book *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump and the Storming of the Presidency* (2017).

[80] Bob Woodward (2018) makes a similar point. According to him 'Bannon realized that Trump did not know the most rudimentary knowledge of politics' (p. 4).

relationship between Bannon and Trump was more akin to a Faustian pact—Trump, perhaps unknowingly, was the vehicle for implementing Bannon's radical right-wing agenda.

Thereafter, from the later stages of his campaign onwards and into the first months of his presidency, Trump would enthusiastically embrace the idea that he was the ideological heir to Andrew Jackson (Johnson & Tumulty, 2017).[81] This transformation caused a commentator to note that 'Trump's love affair with the ghost of Andrew Jackson is a relatively newfound one' (Suebsaeng, 2017).[82]

Professor Daniel Feller (2021), a noted scholar of the Jackson presidency, explains that 'Trump invited us to see him through the lens of Andrew Jackson' (p. 668). For example, in a speech[83] comparing himself to Jackson, Trump remarked that Jackson 'was one of our great Presidents.' In the same speech, Trump proceeded to claim that Jackson 'confronted and defied an arrogant elite'. Rhetorically, Trump goes on to remark, 'does that sound familiar to you? I wonder why they keep talking about Trump and Jackson, Jackson and Trump'. The comparisons did not end there. According to Trump 'Jackson rejected authority that looked down on the common people' and, inviting further comparisons, Trump flatteringly concluded that, like him, Jackson was 'the people's president' (Trump, 2017).

Mead, in his (2017) paper *The Jacksonian Tradition*, explained that Jacksonianism was 'less an intellectual or political movement than an expression of social, cultural and religious values' (p. 9). Furthermore, he continues, it was 'neither an ideology nor a self-conscious movement' but was, instead, a 'folk-ideology' (op cit). For Mead, Jacksonianism represented 'an instinct rather an ideology—a culturally shaped set of beliefs and emotions rather than a

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[81] Though Trump would readily identify with Jackson it is evident that this was at best superficial and his knowledge of Jackson minimal. After entering office Trump would explain Jackson was angry about the advent of the Civil War—however, despite Trump's assertion, Jackson had in fact been dead for sixteen years. See: Frazier (2017).

[82] Suebsaeng goes on to explain that Trump's only previous reference to Jackson was in a 2013 tweet—in which Trump made no reference to Jackson's politics or legacy. Suebsaeng also reports that in April 2016 Trump was specifically invited to comment on a proposal to remove Jackson from the twenty-dollar bill—he replied that this was 'pure political correctness' but again made no wider reference to Jackson or indeed why he thought that Jackson's legacy might be compromised. Similarly, Hohmann (2017) reports that during a pre-inaugural dinner speech Trump likened his *movement* to the one that elected Jackson. Revealingly, Trump explained that 'there hasn't been anything like this since Andrew Jackson'. Yet, he is then reported as saying, 'Andrew Jackson! What year was Andrew Jackson? That was a long time ago!' Chait (2017) explains that 'the strategy sprung a series of leaks, largely because Trump [did] not grasp the context of the debate in which Jackson was rooted. He claimed strangely that Jackson would have stopped the Civil War, even though Jackson was dedicated to the expansion of slavery and supported measures to prohibit debating the issue in Congress or mailing abolition literature to the South.'

[83] In a speech made during a ceremonial visit to *The Hermitage*, Andrew Jackson's plantation home in Nashville, TN, on 15 March 2017 (for the full text see Trump, D., 2017).

set of ideas' (ibid, p. 17). It is perhaps not surprising therefore that Steve Bannon would find Mead's version of Jacksonianism so attractive (Feller, ibid, p. 671). It was Bannon's view that the Trump campaign was doomed unless it was ideologically grounded in something more rational than Trump's whimsical penchant for espousing populist troupes. As Joshua Green explains, 'Trump repeated certain populist themes. These were expressions of an attitude—a marketing campaign—rather than a set of policies' (2017, p. 241).

However, according to Daniel Feller (2021), Trump was not a Jacksonian—and never would be. For Feller the comparisons are unsustainable—and have, he argues, arisen as the result of a narrative that has more to do with political exigency and historical misrepresentation. As Feller explains, when it comes to comparisons with Trump, historians and political ideologists have been 'acquiescent and even directly complicit in warping [the] evidence to propound a shallow historical analogy for political effect' (ibid, p. 667). This narrative has led to a debate where:

> one side uncritically celebrates the American past as exemplary, and charges those who fail to do so with being unpatriotic or worse. The other side, perhaps hypercritically, sees the American record as deeply flawed—not a litany of unblemished accomplishment but of thwarted aspirations, pernicious myths, and persistent injustices (ibid, p. 668).

He goes on to explain that:

> both sides use Andrew Jackson, in opposite ways, to make their case. And yet, the Jackson they invoke has come to bear only a tenuous resemblance to the living man. In fitting him for use as a symbolic stand-in for a version of American history, both sides have stretched him toward caricature (ibid).[84]

Feller concludes that the debate about the ideological similarities between Trump and Jackson is flawed, because it is based on a false premise. He attributes this to the work of Walter Russell Mead and his paper, *The Jacksonian Tradition* (ibid, p. 669). Feller describes Mead's work as 'grossly oversimplified' and his use of history as 'undisciplined, indiscriminate, and even just plain wrong' (op cit). It is Feller's contention that Mead had 'tendentiously manipulated a historical literature' to fit a particular narrative (op cit). As Feller explains, 'Mead's Jacksonian tradition was so amorphous as to be analytically all but useless' and 'further, and rather astoundingly, he never explained why he called it Jacksonian—that is, what, if anything, connected his bundle of traits to Andrew Jackson, whose name he had given to them' (ibid, p. 670). However, for compelling and obvious

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[84] For example, in an exchange of emails with the author, Professor Katzenstein (2021) describes Trump as follows, 'like G.W. Bush he is a *Jacksonian* and unlike Bush he is an *ethno-nationalist racist*' (24 March 2021).

reasons, it was a narrative that suited Bannon even if it had 'become boldly untethered from reality' (ibid, p. 672). The comparison had a purpose: it located Trump in a historical tradition that favourably compared him to a revered president. Moreover, it provided a much needed ideological and explanatory framework that would lend legitimacy to Trump and Trumpism that Bannon sought (Harford, 2017).

According to Feller (ibid, p. 671), it was Mead's partial and partisan version of Jackson that Steve Bannon identified with when 'he touted Andrew Jackson as a presidential model.' As Professor Mark Cheatham (2017) explains, 'Trump's inner circle', which included Bannon, embraced the comparison with Jackson 'to further the argument that their candidate and Jackson were populist leaders motivated solely by their desire to help the American people'. Importantly, as Hylton (2017) explains, Bannon's 'worldview', was derived from his reading of Mead—and Bannon would, in turn, influence Trump (Green, 2017, p. 208) convincing him that he was heir to Jackson's legacy (Johnson & Tumulty, 2017). According to Suebsaeng (2017) Bannon encouraged Trump to regard himself as the 'clear descendant of Jacksonian populism'.

However, Feller (2021) comprehensively dismisses these comparisons in his careful deconstruction of Mead's thesis—Feller makes the following point:

> Distortion and misrepresentation in the heat of partisan debate are not new, and they are not news. Still, the amount of reckless error that Andrew Jackson's purported resemblance to Donald Trump has flung into public discussion is surprising. With accusations of "fake news" flying about, one would expect historians and reputable journalists to attend more carefully to their facts, not less. Yet, writers who would not think to quote something that someone said yesterday without carefully confirming its accuracy now grab their history wherever they can get it. A cardinal rule of sound journalistic and scholarly practice, to check facts and quotations by tracing them back to their original source, is now casually disregarded in the search for a glib analogy or a striking headline (ibid, p. 679).

Feller (2021) rhetorically asks what the 'likening of Donald Trump to Andrew Jackson has taught us.' And the answer, he concludes, 'is nothing, or at least nothing of any real value' (p. 680). Cheatham (2017) draws a similar conclusion—according to him the comparisons are 'superficial and insubstantial'. However, in drawing their conclusions, both writers allude to something else. According to Cheatham (ibid) the comparisons fail because Trump was 'outside of the bounds of traditional American political culture'. For Feller, Trump was 'a political outsider seeking to establish his legitimacy, by assimilating himself to another insurgent president famous for his fierce patriotism and irresistible popularity it held obvious uses' (ibid, p. 680). Feller and Cheatham refer to Trump's 'outsider' status. If indeed Trump was an outsider—a premise that was readily reconciled with his brand of idiosyncratic politics—the challenge remained one of how to explain him? Bannon would

alight upon the Jacksonian model for obvious and compelling reasons: firstly, Trump's politics could be located within a historical framework that leant legitimacy to his campaign; secondly, Trump could be aligned to a political tradition that appeared to articulate the sentiments of many Americans (Lowry, 2015)—in other words, Trump was only an outsider to those who embraced his politics; thirdly, by framing Trump as the heir to Jackson he could be favourably compared with a widely revered predecessor—and, in so doing, his political positions could be turned into a defensible policy platform that, until the arrival of Bannon, had been missing. When Bannon took over the Trump campaign, he quickly realised that Trump was mining a seam of voter disaffection—but Trump could not explain his success much less turn it into a meaningful and comprehensible (Woodward, 2017, p. 4;[85] Green, 2017, p. 241). As Glasser (2018) correctly identified, the Jacksonian model would become the vehicle for harnessing Trump's ideologically amorphous campaign that had, until its adoption, been wanting for an 'intellectual framework'.

Conclusion

Daniel Feller (2021) explains, Trump's

> acolytes celebrate the qualities they admire in Jackson: his blunt speech, his special connection to the plain people and suspicion and hostility toward the political establishment, his combative approach to the rest of the world, and his willingness to go in headfirst and smash up the status quo—in domestic politics, in foreign affairs, and even in matters of protocol, social convention, and personal behaviour (p. 668)

But, thereafter, the comparisons are difficult to sustain. Mead's concept of a Jacksonian Tradition has some purchase when one considers the social and political fabric of the country but, as Feller explains, as a tradition it is no more rooted in the politics of Andrew Jackson than it is in the politics of any other president. After the election of Trump Mead would claim that 'the distinctively American populism Trump espouses is rooted in the thought and culture of the country's first populist president, Andrew Jackson' (2017, p. 3). Mead is correct—but only insofar that Trump was deferring to Bannon which, if Green (2017) is correct, was nothing more than an accommodation for Trump because just a year later Bannon would be dismissed from the administration and with him went any pretence that the Trump presidency was ideologically rooted in the tradition of Andrew Jackson.[86]

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[85] Bannon is widely regarded as the source of Woodward's 2017 book *Fear: Trump in the White House.*

[86] Bannon joined the Trump campaign on 17th August 2016 as its Chief Executive Officer. He then joined the administration, serving as Chief Strategist to the president. He left the administration 18th August 2017 (the circumstances of his departure are disputed.

Feller argued that Andrew Jackson entered the presidency with a set of fundamental beliefs about politics and government and what the scope of government should be; how decisions should be made and what values should be pursued. Trump exhibited none of these. It is difficult therefore to reconcile Mead's version of Jacksonianism with Trumpism. In the *Jacksonian Tradition* Mead (1999, p. 18) contended that 'Jacksonianism is not a doctrine but an emotion'. Had he applied this to Trumpism he may have been closer to the mark which might explain why, in the first place, Bannon would adopt Mead's version of Jacksonianism to rend, contextualise and define the populist appeal of Trump and Trumpism.

Axiomatically, we can reasonably conclude that Steve Bannon's attempt to frame Trump's populism within the traditions of Jacksonian politics was a compelling commentary about the fact that Trumpism lacked any sort of ideological underpinning. Not surprisingly, Bannon's attempt to ground Trumpism in something that was historically and readily explicable would be thwarted by Trump who preferred his own arsy-versy way of doing politics. Consequently, Bannon's attempt to locate Trump within a historical tradition that drew on the legacy of Andrew Jackson would quickly dissipate. However, Jacksonianism would be resurrected but in a different guise—this was the argument that Trump was a political pragmatist, which the next chapter considers.

Chapter 3

During a panel discussion between the 2016 presidential campaign managers, Corey Lewandowski—who had managed Donald Trump's campaign from April 2015 to June 2016—was asked how Trump would approach the role of president.[87] Lewandowski explained that Trump would approach the office of president in the same way he had run his businesses: Trump, Lewandowski predicted, would to be a pragmatist president. In formulating his answer Lewandowski was drawing on a mistaken, but often commonly cited comparison, between the roles of a CEO and the role of the president of the United States. Lewandowski was arguing that a successful deal-making businessman could readily and easily translate that success into political success. Trump was, after all, 'the greatest deal-make the country had ever seen', explained Lewandowski.[88] According to Lewandowski, business and politics shared a common denominator: both enterprises were forms of deal-making, about which Trump excelled, so it was claimed. It is because of Trump's deal making prowess that Lewandowski describes him as a pragmatist—but, in making this argument, Lewandowski makes an important caveat: Trump is a different because his pragmatism is unconcerned with politics but, rather, it is about results. Lewandowski's understanding about what Trump might bring to the presidency has echoes in an article written by the philosopher Professor Steven Ross (2009) titled *Pragmatism, Philosophical and Political*. Ross explains as follows 'The pragmatist could not care less what the *pedigree* of an idea is, who likes it, who doesn't, and why. A pragmatist in this sense of the term just wants evidence of its likelihood to succeed or fail given a set of facts in the background.' Newt Gingrich (2017a, p. 12) makes the same point in his book *Understanding Trump* explaining that as a pragmatist Trump is 'only interested in what works'.

In developing their arguments Lewandowski and Gingrich both maintain that Trump's pragmatism is of a different kind. This difference is important because most politicians will, at one time or another, claim that they should be understood as pragmatists.[89] For both Lewandowski and Gingrich Trump's pragmatism was different because to be a success in

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[87] See: Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, 2017.

[88] https://insider.foxnews.com/2017/04/22/corey-lewandowski-president-trump-accomplishments-first-100-days

[89] For example, both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton would lay claim to the argument that they were pragmatist politicians: Obama did so in order distinguish himself from Clinton in his 2008 campaign to be the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party—according to Obama Clinton was an idealist. Later, Clinton in her 2016 campaign to be the nominee, described herself as a pragmatist by unfavourably comparing her policies to those of Bernie Sanders, who she accused of being an idealist (Waldman, 2016).

business you must, they argue, be a pragmatist to succeed. And, as a corollary, they infer that politicians are unable to make pragmatic decisions—despite their claims otherwise—because they are beholden to ideological and personal concerns, such as power, personal ambition and party affiliation. In other words, they are corrupted, unable to make deals because they are compromised. Trump, however, is not an ideologue and, as a success on his own terms, he is not beholden to anyone or any party. He is, they argue, the embodiment of what it means to be a pragmatist. Looked at another way both appear to be relying on an argument that business and politics had once shared a common thread—that common thread was pragmatism. And, while business retained this thread, the business of politics had long since relinquished any pretence that pragmatism had a role to play in its deliberations. Rather, politics had become the preserve of a self-perpetuating class of politicians, the so-called establishment, who no longer understood their electorate much less did they hold their interests at heart.

The Art of Pragmatism

While Donald Trump has never described himself as a pragmatist it may reasonably be inferred from his claims to be a dealmaker that he regarded himself as a pragmatist.[90] His success, both in life and in business, he would explain in *The Art of the Deal* (1987), were down to his abilities as a dealmaker. Consider for example the following quotes from *The Art of the Deal*: 'I never get too attached to one deal or one approach. I keep a lot of balls in the air, because most deals fall out, no matter how promising they seem at first' or 'you can't be imaginative or entrepreneurial if you've got too much structure. I prefer to come to work each day and just see what develops' or 'deals work best when each side gets something it wants from the other' (Economy, 2016). These quotes go some-way to demonstrating Trump's pragmatism—his approach to business accords with the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of a pragmatist as someone 'who adopts a practical and realistic approach to life, or who concentrates on practicalities and facts, rather than theory or ideals'.[91]

Not surprisingly therefore when Trump said he would 'run the country like he ran his businesses' he was linking his success as a businessman with a promise about how he would perform as president. Indeed, Trump maintained that his ability to deliver projects 'under budget and ahead of schedule' should be understood as 'a metaphor for what we can accomplish as a country [with me as president]' (Lerer & Colvin, 2016).[92] Elsewhere Trump's

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[90] In *The Art of the Deal* (1987) Trump describes deal-making as his 'art form' (p. 1).

[91] See: https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/149296?redirectedFrom=pragmatist#eid

[92] Comments reportedly made by Trump during the grand opening of the Trump International Hotel in Washington DC, 26 October 2016.

constant refrain that he would 'fix the system' was another way of declaring his credentials as a pragmatist deal-maker—in other words he was someone who could translate business success into political alchemy.

The question about whether Trump was a political pragmatist frames the discussion for what follows—it will be contended that the answer to this question is important to our understanding of his presidency.[93] For example, Trump entered the presidency with the GOP in control of the Senate and the House of Representatives (Schaeffer, 2021).[94] On balance, there was a reasonable expectation that these propitious circumstances would be ripe for a pragmatic deal-maker to exploit yet, despite Trump's claims that he could deliver *deals*, he would flounder. The problem, as I argue here, was a simple one: Trump was not a pragmatist—he was patently unqualified and unable to take advantage of this favourable confluence of political circumstances, to use what Richard Neustadt (1999) describes as 'the power of persuasion', as will be explained.[95] And, just as pressingly, we need to ask why some have sought refuge in the argument that Trump is a pragmatist. I argue that the impulse to label Trump is reflective of a wider urge, especially by right-wing writers and thinkers, to rend Trump and Trumpism into some sort of coherent explanatory framework from which we can comprehend him and moreover grasp what, if anything, Trumpism means—as we witnessed in the previous chapter.

The idea that Trump was a pragmatist emerged as Trump entered the presidency, gaining traction among conservative commentators and thinkers—who were seeking to explain Trump within an explanatory context.[96] The title of Newt Gingrich's book—*Understanding Trump* (2017a)—was revealing about how little was known about Trump's politics or indeed his thinking. Gingrich argued that Trump was first and foremost a pragmatist.[97] Gingrich's contention was a simple one—and is most readily summarised by Laura Ingraham (2017, p. 163) who described Trump as 'post partisan'.[98] In other words, Trump would not be

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[93] I use the terms political pragmatist and pragmatist interchangeably.

[94] This was only the third time since 1928 that the Republican's had control of the House, Senate and White House.

[95] Wolfe (2018) makes this point, explaining that 'the inability of the right to obtain the repeal of Obamacare while holding both houses of Congress… had surprised everyone, the right included. And even when the extreme right managed to pass legislation, such as the 2017 tax policy… it did so by the narrowest of margins.' (p. 45).

[96] See: Scaramucci, 2016; Hanson, 2020a, p. 380; Horowitz, 2017, p. 139; MacGregor, 2019, p. 12 and Schlafly, Martin, & Decker, 2016, p. 89.

[97] See also Gingrich 2017b.

[98] Ingraham is a right-wing polemicist and commentator.

constrained by partisan politics but would, instead, adopt a pragmatist approach to the presidency.[99] For Gingrich ideology was antithetical to everything that pragmatism stood for—not only was ideology the preserve of the liberal elite it 'had created a corrosive network of private money, lobbyists and interest groups surrounded legislators, creating a web of nebulous relationships that looked bad to a distrustful public' (Zelizer, 2020, p. 8).

Gingrich explains Trump's pragmatism in the following way: 'he is an anti-liberal… common sense, practical person who understands how much of modern political correctness is total baloney and how much our bureaucracies are decrepit and failing' (Seib, 2020, p. *x*). Gingrich was also at lengths to give Trump's pragmatic politics some much needed historical context—in much the same way as Steve Bannon had sought to do (Green, 2017). According to Gingrich, Trump's emergence was an antidote to the politics of partisanship. For Gingrich, politics had become the preserve of a professional elite who no longer understood their electorate—and Trump was the antithesis of those elites. As Victor Davis Hanson (2019) explains, Trump would put the people first and politics second—this was the orthodoxy of pragmatism and it was an orthodoxy that could be traced back to the American Founding, according to both Hanson (2020a) and Gingrich (2017a).

It should be noted that pragmatism has a long and venerable tradition in American politics (Von Drehle, 2019). Not unusually, politicians of all hues have shared a predilection for describing themselves as pragmatists (Goldberg, 2017).[100] Consequently, when a politician sets out his or her pragmatist credentials they do so by distancing themselves from any suggestion that they might be remote from their electorate—the inference, conversely, is that this is the territory of the idealist politician who, unlike the pragmatist, is constrained by a dogmatic adherence to ideology, to their party and to the trappings of power. As Christopher Scalia (2016) explains, the pragmatist politician cares

> little about ideological purity or abstract principles [to] pride themselves on their independence… '[sampling] widely from the smorgasbord of political ideas to find the best solution to a pressing problem.[101]

This is precisely why politicians seek refuge in the concept that they are first and foremost pragmatists. For Tomasky (2017), politicians want to be seen as the person who can get

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[99] President Barrack Obama, for example, would also describe Trump as a pragmatist. He did so after meeting Trump who was then president-elect (Saba, 2016). Obama's description of Trump may have been wishful thinking or at least an attempt to calm the nerves of those who had not voted for Trump.

[100] See footnote 95.

[101] Scalia attributes his definition to the American political philosophers William James and John Dewey.

things done, who can 'fix problems'—hence pragmatism's wholesale adoption by politicians and its veneration as a political virtue (Greenwald, 2007) and one that is carefully cultivated by politicians (Ross, 2009). However, for Gingrich, the pragmatist is concerned only with 'what works' (ibid, p. 12). *What works* is characteristic of Trump's pragmatic approach to business—which, Gingrich argues, Trump would bring to the presidency by the simple expedient of making practical and realistic deals and fixing problems that were beneficial to all. Moreover, and just as importantly, Trump would be able to resolve politically difficult questions precisely because he was politically flexible—unconstrained by party orthodoxy or political convention and, if a deal was required to be made Trump would, Gingrich argues, rise above ideological or party affiliations to try something different to fix the problem.

Pragmatism and Politics

Like Gingrich, Mychal Massie (2017)[102] in an article titled *Trump is Not a Conservative, He's a Pragmatist*, explains why Trump should be regarded as a pragmatist politician.

Massie commences by arguing that American politics is hamstrung by partisanship at every level of government. He proceeds to argue that political problems remain largely intractable because political solutions had become incommensurable—so that even an agreement to agree to disagree becomes a partisan and polarised issue. This, he maintains, is because politicians are unable to envision a solution that is not *political*—as a consequence, every issue becomes a subjectively political problem which, in turn, removes the possibility that an objectively based solution could be mutually agreed upon. Massie argues that there is an alternative to this collapse into subjectivism and that alternative is pragmatism which, he proposes, is non-partisan and therefore objectively based—and more pressingly, it is something that contemporary politicians are conspicuously unable to engage or recognise. This is because politicians are inherently subjective. Invariably, politicians are, he maintains, unable to act pragmatically. Massie attributes this to the ideological and partisan entrenchment that now characterises American politics. It is worth noting that Massie's analysis has echoes in some of what Donald Trump had been arguing during his run for the presidency—according to the presidential scholar Jeffrey Engel (2022, p. 241) Trump regarded politicians as 'enthralled by globalism, corrupted by personal gain [and] wholly incompetent'.

But, as Massie argues, there was a corrective for this—this is where the pragmatist enters the frame, in the form of Donald Trump. According to Massie, Trump, as a businessman, is unconstrained by politics and therefore able to approach politics from a wholly objective

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[102] Massie is a conservative commentator.

standpoint. For Massie, this is an important distinction—as a businessman Trump is, in effect, apolitical. As we noted earlier, Laura Ingraham (2017) makes a similar point when she wrote that Trump was 'post-partisan' (p. 163). From this premise Massie proceeds to argue that Trump would approach political problems objectively as though they were business problems. Massie's conception of objectivity appears to rest on what he regards as Trump's indifference to politics which means that he is uncontaminated and unconstrained by subjective ideological or political considerations—effectively, the Trump he describes, resides somewhere outside the political arena. Massie explains that Trump 'sees a problem and understands it must be fixed. He doesn't see the problem as liberal or conservative he sees it only as a problem.' In other words, he is objective or *post-partisan* which has echoes in what Steven Ross (2009) has written. According to Ross 'the good pragmatist, it is said, will be indifferent to which side of the political spectrum champions a policy and asks only how well the policy works?' Therefore, we might reasonably surmise that a pragmatist and a businessman—like Trump—would be able to resolve what had previously appeared intractable. According to Massie's model Trump was able to 'see' problems objectively— because he was a businessman first and a politician second. Thereafter the pragmatist fixes the problem—Massie reiterates the point by explaining: 'pragmatists see a problem and find ways to fix them. They do not see a problem and compound it by creating more problems.' Consequently, as Jelani Cobb (2017) notes, the electorate would, as a result 'gravitate to a leader who could translate the principles of business to government'.

Massie's logic was simple: if politicians could relinquish partisanship, the solution to the problems they sought answers to would become immediately apparent and, just as importantly, these solutions would be something they could all agree. Massie's contention was that Trump's deal-making embodied this very form of pragmatism—as he explains 'successful businessmen like Donald Trump find ways to make things work'.

Fact-Based Politics and the Entrepreneurial Approach to Knowledge

Newt Gingrich,[103] in his book *Understanding Trump* (2017a), amplifies the argument that Trump is a pragmatist—like Massie it is Gingrich's contention that Trump should be understood first and 'foremost as a pragmatist' (p. 11).[104] As Steven Ross (2009) explains, the pragmatic approach to politics asked

> if [something] works well, generates good results, fine; it will be embraced. If not, it is cast aside. There is no interest in ideological purity, and no embarrassment if one uses one policy against one set of facts and what might in some ways be a contrary one against another.[105]

This is similar to the point made by Gingrich, who explains that Trump would 'make the federal government effective, accountable, and an adherent to the same economic principles that guide American families and businesses every day' (2017a, p. 269). Gingrich is explicit: some politicians are not concerned with what works but instead are concerned only with esoteric ideological questions or else power for its own sake. In this particular regard, Trump's pragmatism, he argues, marks the return of he calls 'fact-based' politics (ibid, p. 12).[106] Furthermore,

> Trump's approach is precisely the factual, trial and error, learn-by-doing, pragmatic model Tocqueville was describing. As a businessman, Trump is practical and willing to focus his energy and try unorthodox methods to find ways to accomplish his goals (ibid, p. 269).

Like Massie, Gingrich appears to be arguing that Trump's pragmatism is born of his experiences as a businessman.[107] Gingrich proceeds to explain how Trump thinks: 'he knows what he needs to know... at the time when he needs to know (ibid, p. 7) and then 'he would learn by doing it' (ibid, p. 74). In other words, Trump would not waste his time on partisan

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[103] It is sometimes overlooked that Gingrich is a historian by training. Before entering politics, he obtained a PhD in history and then taught at West Georgia College. Gerald Seib (2020, p. 186) describes Gingrich as 'the slayer of sacred cows and the enemy of the prevailing political system and its political correctness'. Gingrich's identification with Trump is perhaps not surprising. Indeed, the admiration was rewarded by the fact that Gingrich was considered as a potential running mate by Trump.

[104] He qualifies this remark explaining that Trump is not an ideologue (op cit).

[105] It should be noted that Ross was writing in 2009 where he was commenting upon the pragmatism of the Obama administration.

[106] According to Gingrich, *fact-based* appears to mean pragmatic.

[107] Other authors make the same argument, see for example: Cormier, 2016; Hanson, 2020a, p. 380; Horowitz, 2017, p. 139; Kreye, 2016; Lewandowski and Bossie, 2017, p. 46; MacGregor, 2019, p. 12 and Schlafly, Martin, & Decker, 2016, p. 89.

or ideological issues. Instead, as a pragmatist, Trump would focus on what he needed to know—everything else would be extraneous.

Gingrich goes to considerable lengths to argue that Trump's emergence was simply the continuation of a politics that was rooted in the customs and traditions of the past but, latterly, had been subverted by liberal progressivism (2017a, p. 17). Gingrich calls this form of pragmatism 'the entrepreneurial approach to knowledge' and it is, he concludes, 'the core American philosophy' (ibid, p. 276) which arises through a 'fealty to traditional cultural values' (Seib, 2020, p.235). Notably, the entrepreneurial approach to knowledge is one that favours practical knowledge over formal knowledge, as Gingrich explains (2017a, p. 75). Throughout his book Gingrich returns to this theme—for him pragmatism is rooted in practical knowledge. He argues that 'a president [like Trump] who favours practical knowledge over formal knowledge' will, he concludes, create 'a huge opportunity for themselves' (op cit).

Like Massie, Gingrich regards Trump's lack of political experience as a political virtue albeit inexperience in politics is not a virtue unless it is countered by experience in business, through the acquisition of practical knowledge (ibid, p. 73). Moreover, for Gingrich, Trump's inexperience as a politician meant he was unsullied by party affiliation and the political machinations of office—Trump would therefore be able to apply a much needed dose of pragmatism to a political system that had become mired in an ideological and partisan swamp of its own making and he would simply do so by drawing on 'his instincts' (ibid, p. 13), 'based on what [Trump] thinks will work' (Seib, 2020, p. 195).

It is easy to comprehend why Gingrich and Massie might come to regard Trump as a pragmatist: Trump's business background and lack of previous political experience gave rise to the suggestion that he was completely authentic—someone who was unconstrained by political orthodoxy which, in turn, leant substance to the argument that, unlike the political class, Trump would speak truth to power (Timm, 2015).[108] Thus, steeped in the art of the deal Trump claimed he had the answers to problems that conventional wisdom suggested were intractable and much too complex to resolve in a political system characterised by partisanship and gridlock.[109]

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[108] Timm (2015) explains that Trump's willingness to speak truth to power was because 'Trump knows that wealthy people have inordinate power to influence elections, because he is usually one of them'.

[109] The decline of the post-war consensus in US politics has been extensively documented, see for example Brownstein (2008), Klein (2020) and Perlstein (2001, 2008).

Both Gingrich and Massie propose that pragmatism amounts to nothing more complicated than a common-sense willingness to obtain a clear understanding of the facts, which they argue is precisely how business operates. Their contention was that Trump's success as a businessman was evidence of his pragmatism. According to Gingrich this was precisely what a pragmatic Trump would do: using the common sense he had acquired as a businessman to make deals and fix what had previously been broken. All that was required was for Trump to apply 'the folk wisdom of common sense' (Hanson, 2020a, p. 97).

Both commentators draw heavily on Trump's business background to fashion their arguments, based on the following: i). Trump was a pragmatist and ii). he would apply this common-sense pragmatism he had acquired as a businessman to political problems. However, this overreliance on Trump's business background as a medium for explaining how he might approach politics reflected what Trump had been saying throughout his many and various forays into the political arena over the years—for example, in politics, Trump explained, that you had be *flexible*: 'when you're dealing, and that's what I am, I'm a dealer, you don't go in with plans. You go in with a certain flexibility. And you sort of wheel and deal' (Peters, 2015). Notably, while Trump does not expressly describe himself as a pragmatist his frequent disquisitions on the value of being a flexible negotiator provide us with some insight about how he understands the political process and, for example, the role of president. Indeed, his interpretation of what it means to be flexible would suggest that he sees himself as something of a pragmatist. This flexibility is most obviously evidenced by Trump's embrace of political positions that later he has renounced, or which are contradictory. Andrew Sullivan (2021, p. 383) describes Trump as 'consistent in his inconsistency'. Similarly, Jill Filipovic (2020) makes the same point—explaining that 'inconsistency is perhaps the most consistent thing about Trump'. Not surprisingly, Trump has made a virtue of his political incontinence explaining,

> in life you have to be flexible. You have to have flexibility. You have to change. You may say one thing, and then the following year you want to change it because circumstances are different.[110]

So, if anything demonstrated Trump's pragmatism it was his own understanding about what it meant to be flexible—which accords with what Harvey Cormier (2016) describes as 'pragmatic flexibility'. Cormier explains that the '[pragmatist] does not promise perfect government... [but does] at least promise *government* or a real effort to give people what they want'. Certainly, the politics of 'what works' has echoes in Trump's claim that he would 'fix' everything from health care to the wall, etc, by the simple salve of 'making great deals.'

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[110] Speech to AIPAC 21 March 2016 available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZGgMJ3QDAQ

And, as Adam Davidson (2016) noted, 'Trump's unique ability to make deals' was part of his 'crucial promise' to the electorate. We can conclude that flexibility means being ready to relinquish one political position for another, to achieve a particular goal. This is entirely consistent with Gingrich's argument that Trump eschewed ideology—while the ideologue is wedded to a position the pragmatist is contrastingly free to embrace what works to get things done. However, while 'what works' may sound like a clarion-call for a new way of doing politics, it becomes problematic in practice.

Deal-making and the Limits of Pragmatism

In *The Art of the Deal* Trump explains that in business the successful dealmaker is someone who enters a negotiation with an end in mind—which is to maximise his or her position or, in other words, has Trump explains, to win. However, when entering a negotiation, the participant does so in the knowledge that in order to obtain what they want they may have to compromise, or else they walk away—this, presumably, is what it means to be a pragmatist. But, in politics, unlike in business, it is often the case that the parties cannot simply walk away—at least not without serious consequences. Neither Gingrich nor Massie address this problem. Furthermore, when laying out the intellectual case for Trump, Gingrich appears to be suggesting that politics has no role to play when a pragmatist—like Trump—decides to do something. But this would be to deny how politics works. In essence, Gingrich was proposing that Trump's career in business gave him a level of political objectivity that was denied others—yet, even if this was the case, Gingrich fails to consider how Trump's pragmatism might work in practice when, administratively, it meets political reality—as Gary Galles (2017) explains, 'there is an essential distinction between pragmatic *market* deal-making and pragmatic *political* deal-making'. For Galles (op cit) pragmatic political deal-making is a function of ethics whereas pragmatic market deal-making is not—this raises the question about whether a good deal can ethically be the correct deal? Moreover, Trump has never explained what he means by a *deal* or a *fix*—or indeed how these business concepts might apply to politics. However, it can reasonably be inferred that 'making a deal' is the process of negotiating a fix. A deal is then concluded: this is the fix. However, in *The Art of the Deal* Trump's negotiating positions are nothing but subjective—focused as they are on winning at all costs, as Zack Beauchamp (2016a) explains:

> What you learn about Trump from reading *The Art of the Deal* is that he doesn't see deals as business transactions so much as measures of one's success at life. If that's the case, then you're justified in doing anything — *anything* — to make sure you

come out on top... we can see now that running for president isn't about ideology or policy for Trump. It's about winning the ultimate status competition.[111]

Consequently, it is not exactly clear what Gingrich means when he describes Trump as a pragmatist—does he, for example, mean that Trump was apolitical?[112] According to Gingrich Trump was essentially apolitical (although he steers clear of saying so)—which has echoes in Laura Ingraham's (2017, p. 163) argument that Trump was 'post-partisan.' This would suggest that he was objectively interested in obtaining the right result only. Yet this would appear to be unrealistic, both in theory and in practice. Gingrich's argument that Trump could somehow remove himself from politics is more akin to John Rawls' philosophical conception of the 'veil of ignorance'.[113]

Jonathan Chait (2017a) deals with some of these questions in an article in which he takes issue with the argument that Trump is a pragmatist. Chait opens the article by explaining that Trump 'does not care very much about political ideas' (op cit). For Chait this apparent lack of interest in politics explains why Trump has vacillated between political positions that oftentimes have been diametrically opposed. Trump has, for example, supported and opposed abortion rights, higher taxes on the rich, universal health care, gay marriage, etc.[114] Unlike Gingrich and Massie Chait argues that Trump's so-called 'flexibility' is not explained by pragmatism. According to Chait it would be a mistake to regard Trump's changes of political positions as evidence that he takes a pragmatic approach to politics. Rather, Trump has simply 'aligned himself with whichever party seemed to benefit him at any given moment' (op cit) or, as Jill Filipovic (2020) explains, 'the answer is whatever is politically expedient in the moment'.[115] Consequently, while the likes of Gingrich and Massie argue that Trump's inconstance is the evidence of a pragmatist politician who was prepared to change his views, unbound by ideological considerations, Chait's analysis is revealing of a different

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[111] Beauchamp explains that *The Art of the Deal* runs to some 364 pages of which only 20 pages are about deal making—the rest of the book is concerned with extraneous matters pertaining to Trump's personal and business life.

[112] The same problem applies to Mychal Massie's argument that Trump is a pragmatist.

[113] *A Theory of Justice* (1971). The 'veil of ignorance' is a philosophical concept that hypothetically presupposes that the parties to a political decision know nothing about their personal circumstances.

[114] Trump has variously sought to justify his many and frequent 'flip-flops' by explaining that:

> I've never seen a successful person who wasn't flexible and who didn't have a certain degree of flexibility. You have to be flexible because you learn... If you're going to be one way and you think it's wrong, does that mean the rest of your life you have to go in the wrong direction because you don't want to change? (Hagan, 2016)

[115] Kruse and Weiland (2016) wryly explain that 'Trump has turned self-contradiction into an art form'.

and far more compelling explanation: Trump's political positions owe nothing to pragmatism but are but simply the adoption of whatever happened to be politically vogue—in other words it is not a pragmatism, borne of substance or principle—Chait explains that this is because there is no demonstrable evidence that Trump has engaged intellectually or politically with the ideas he adopts and espouses. Moreover, Chait goes further arguing that this is not a complete picture: in addition to not caring very much about political ideas Trump does 'not *know* very much about political ideas.' Beauchamp (2016b) explains that when Trump takes up a contradictory position he is 'unable to account for why he has changed his mind' because much of what he says 'doesn't cross the basic threshold of being logically coherent and grounded in actual facts'. In sum, Trump does not know *why* he has vacillated between one position and another, much less has he been able to explain why it might conflict with other positions he has held or previously expressed. Chait explains that this is because

> Trump has no context for processing ideas. He does not understand which kinds of ideas imply support for which kinds of policies, nor why political figures tend to believe what they do, nor why they agree or disagree with one another (op cit).

Chait goes on to explain that this is because Trump 'is not so much non-ideological as sub-ideological' (op cit). In other words, Trump does not understand politics: he will simply say whatever suits him in the moment because 'political debate remains largely mysterious to him' (op cit). Trump is, according to Beauchamp (2016b), 'post-fact, post-logic'. In other words, Trump

> thinks about politics like a low-information voter, which enabled him to speak their language naturally. His stated belief during the campaign that he could expertly craft a series of popular deals —*it's going to be so easy*— appealed to low-information voters because it earnestly described the political world as they see it (op cit).

Chait however agrees with Gingrich's argument that Trump's approach to politics is informed by his experiences as a businessman. As Chait explains Trump would 'constantly relate questions about politics back to himself and his alleged deal-making genius'. Joshua Green (2017, p. 239) makes a similar point, noting that 'Trump equated politics with business.' It is easy to understand why Gingrich and others would rely on Trump's business background because this was the same argument that Trump would rely upon throughout his campaign—when declaring his candidacy for the presidency Trump announced that the country needed a president 'who wrote *The Art of the Deal*' (Mayer, 2016; Flores, 2016).[116]

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[116] Trump did not write *The Art of the Deal*. Maggie Haberman (2022, p. 95) explains that the book was first envisioned by Roger Stone (a right-wing publicist) who saw it as an opportunity for generating publicity and, potentially, as a platform from which to base a future presidential bid. However, with regards to the authorship, Trump 'made the rare acknowledgement that writing his story was something he was incapable of doing on his own' (ibid, p. 92). Consequently, the book was written in collaboration with Tony Schwartz who was also responsible for the book's title (ibid, p. 93).

And, as Trump (1987, p. 1) modestly explains in *The Art of the Deal*, deals were his 'art form'.[117] Again, it is not surprising that Trump would relate political questions back to his success in business as an explanation for why he would make a successful president, explaining that, 'I'm a negotiator. I've done very well over the years through negotiation'[118] or 'that's what I do, is deals. I know deals, I think, better than anybody knows deals.'[119] As Michael Nelson (2019, p. 146) describes 'Trump's confidence about his deal-making prowess' as 'overweening', 'burnish[ing] his image as a master deal-maker unrivalled in negotiations' (Zelizer, 2022, p. 13). As Todd Schaefer (2021, p. 8) notes, 'Trump came into office claiming a particular knowledge and expertise at negotiation and criticizing his predecessors for poor deal-making.' Thus, drawing on his experiences in business, Trump saw himself as someone who got things done, which was what deal-making was really about: making pragmatic decisions (Galles, 2017).[120]

When Trump pronounced that the country needed the author of *The Art of the Deal* he was strongly suggesting that if anyone wanted an understanding about how he would run the country they need only read *The Art of the Deal* (Flores, 2016). Zack Beauchamp (2016a) agrees that *The Art of the Deal* is revealing—but not in ways that Trump could have anticipated.[121]

According to Beauchamp's analysis, Trump's bid for the presidency was 'just another deal'. It was not, he adds, 'about ideology or policy' (op cit). In addition, as well as having no interest in ideology, Trump had no experience of government (Astor and Parlapiano, 2019; Balz, 2010; Blanding, 2011; Coulter, 2019). It was this post-fact, post-logic and post-partisan mix that he would bring to the presidency. Given Trump's seeming reluctance to talk about policies except in the broadest terms, together with his lack of experience, it was hardly

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[117] However, as Malhotra and Moore (2016) explain,

> '… there is special reason to doubt that Trump's wealth can be traced to his abilities as a negotiator. It's been reported that if Trump had simply invested the fortune he received from his father in an S&P 500 index fund in 1982 and made *no* deals, he would have $8 billion now. In other words, Trump's deal-making has actually cost him billions of dollars.'

[118] Republican Presidential Debate, 25 February 2016, Houston, TX.

[119] See: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-secretary-general-soltenberg-nato-bilateral-meeting/

[120] Much has been written about Trump's skill as a negotiator. Kogan (2019) characterises Trump's so-called *take it or leave it* approach as that of a 'coercive negotiator'.

[121] According to Maggie Haberman (2022) when the book was published 'Trump did all he could to ensure the book made it onto the bestseller list. He directed aides to buy up copies where they could find them, specifying that his casino executives were responsible for four thousand for each casino' (p. 96).

surprising that he would fall back on what he knew best, which was running a relatively small and far from successful real estate business while cultivating an image of himself in the media. For Beauchamp this explained why Trump was unable to distinguish between what was good for the country and what personally good for him—in Trump's mind they were indistinguishable. Consequently, when Trump claimed to want the best deal for the country there is a notable difference between what Trump means and what people think he means— for Trump a successful deal is concluded when it is success for Trump personally. In this sense pragmatism is an entirely transactional concept and one that would not readily translate to governing, especially in the absence of a clearly articulated policy agenda—which Trump would discover, much to his frustration, once in office.

Scott Alexander (2016) summarises Trump's so-called pragmatism in the following way: 'forget about policy issues, I'm just going to steamroll through this whole thing by being personally strong and talented'. In effect, therefore, Trump's approach to governing is an essentially pragmatic one but *only* if you understand politics as a transactional process (Watts, 2017). Gary Gelles (2017) explains that political deal-making is different to deal-making in business because, as he argues, success cannot be achieved by 'pragmatically compromising moral and ethical principles'—which Trump fails to comprehend. Dylan Matthews (2017) takes up this same point in his analysis of *The Art of the Deal* explaining that pragmatism, as Trump understood the concept, was one that was compromised by 'his own limited and blinkered experience of the world, one that mistakes the absolute worst, most dysfunctional parts of the American economy for the way the entire world works' which, if Gelles (2017) is to be believed, explains why Trump would struggle once in office.

The Art of the Deal is revealing in other ways—as Zack Beauchamp (2017) explains. For Beauchamp, Trump's deal-making is a zero-sum game: you are either a winner or a loser. For Trump, the means justified the ends—an approach that can readily be described as pragmatic. Deal-making as Trump understands it (i.e. winning at all costs in a zero-sum world) might translate in the narrow world of real-estate but, where politics is concerned, it is difficult to see how this would work—as Trump would find when, for example, he tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA).[122] In politics it is important to be able to foster collaborative partnerships but, as Leslie Mulligan (2018) explains, the negotiating tactics advocated by Trump ran contrary to best business practice and, ultimately, are counter-

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[122] The Affordable Care Act or ACA is often referred to as 'Obamacare'.

productive.[123] Neil Irwin (2017) makes a similar point: in the narrow world of business you can bluff your way to success but not however when it concerns policy issues—as he explains

> It is an approach that has defined Mr. Trump's deal-making career: Make some seemingly outlandish offer as a starting point for negotiations to try to shift the entire frame of reference for the haggling that will follow. This strategy can certainly work in some circumstances. It also has distinct limits in complex negotiations like those in public policy, as the administration's experience shows.

Susan Caminiti (2017) explains that Trump's *take or leave it* approach to negotiation may work in real estate but is unsuited to politics where, she argues, the parties to the negotiation must have some knowledge about the *context* within which they are transacting—simply going with your gut instincts will not work so 'if you've done real estate deals and branding deals your whole life, you're not going to be an effective negotiator [in politics] if you don't really understand domestic or international context'. Alexander (2016) concludes that 'the best [Trump] can do is say that other people are *bad* at governing, but he's going to be *good* at governing, on account of his deal-making skill'. The problems Trump would encounter once in office are explained by the fact that 'in macroeconomics—which covers the big, broad issues that a president typically worries about—the concept of the deal hardly exists at all' (Davidson, 2017). Davidson (ibid) explains that macroeconomic issues, such as inflation, currency-exchange rates, unemployment, and overall growth 'are impossible to control through any sort of deal' because 'they reflect the underlying structural forces in an economy' which are unamenable to a simple deal, much less a fix. As Davidson (ibid) concludes, 'an economy built on tough deal-making, with clear winners and losers, will always be a poorer one'. Once in office, Trump would concede that, 'Making business decisions and buying buildings doesn't involve heart... these are heavy decisions' (Dawsey, Goldmacher & Isensadt, 2017). Trump would reflect that he thought being president 'would be easier' (Adler, Mason & Holland, 2017). For example, Trump would describe the ACA as 'a disaster' (Radnofsky, Armour and Peterson, 2017). Yet, when he asked how he would repeal and replace the ACA, Trump answered by saying that he 'would make a deal' (Davidson, 2016). This, according to Gingrich, was what a pragmatist politician like Trump would do by bringing 'his personal care approach to getting the American health system to work for everyone' (2017a, p. 214). But, as Chait (2017b) explains, Trump's proposals did not extend

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[123] Jacob Pramuk (2016) takes up the same point about the weaknesses of Trump's negotiating style—which he describes as 'divisive and constitutionally questionable'. He cites the following quote from *The Art of the Deal* as illustrative of why Trump might fail to make a successful transition from business to politics:

> My style of deal-making is quite simple and straightforward. I aim very high, and then I just keep pushing and pushing and pushing to get what I'm after. Sometimes I settle for less than I sought, but in most cases I still end up with what I want.

beyond a vague promise to introduce 'terrific insurance that would take care of everybody'. However, politics and policy would prove to be far more complicated than Trump had anticipated—leaving Trump in a moment of incautious candour to revealingly concede that the ACA 'was an unbelievably complex subject. Nobody knew that health care could be so complicated' (Berman 2017a; Cillizza, 2017; Conway, 2017). Revealingly, Trump infers that he was the only person to discover that repealing the ACA would prove more complicated than expected—something that would have been patently obvious to anyone with a fleeting interest in politics. Chait (2017b) explains why Trump might find the ACA so complex and this was because 'the only thing that held Trump's position together was a refusal to engage with the substance of the issue, and a magical belief that [anything complicated] could all be waved away.' In other words, Trump was unable to reduce politics to its component parts—despite his many announcements to that effect (Blake, 2016). Moreover, Trump's lack of understanding of politics and the political process is compounded because his negotiating style was at odds with how the executive and legislative bodies actually negotiate—as George Tsebelis (2017) explains:

> In legislative bargaining, alternating offers are not part of the protocol. Nor do outside options exist. Indeed, despite news media suggestions that the president sets the legislative agenda with the State of the Union address, Congress sets its legislative agenda.

Tsebelis goes on to explain that

> the president cannot directly intervene in the negotiations; whether the legislature is controlled by his party or the other party, he can act only behind the scenes. Consequently, it makes no sense to say to the other players, "This is your last chance: take it or leave it." As a result, if you are the president and you make this statement, you're not credible. More accurately, you cannot possibly be credible because you do not directly control the agenda.

Chait (2017a) explains that the problem was that, in the absence of substance, Trump simply believed his own rhetoric—that he could 'broker a deal'. However, this assumed Trump was indeed the pragmatist politician that the likes of Gingrich and others had predicted he would be—that Trump could 'grasp the context of the debate' (Chait, ibid) and, secondly, that he would be able to relate questions about politics in terms other than those that were 'entirely personal' (op cit). Yet, the consequences would be all too apparent—most obviously because of Trump's inability to understand 'the sources of the disagreements' that inhered to matters of policy (Chait, 2017a). This, according to Chait, was why he labelled Trump as 'sub ideological.' And, moreover, while Trump was able to form 'strongly held beliefs' he was only able to do so 'in entirely personal terms.' In other words, Trump was unable to contextualise much less comprehend the terms in which politics was conducted. Not surprisingly

'healthcare reform would become 'a comprehensive and decisive failure' (Darroch, 2020, p. 237). Chait concludes that

> [Trump] sees politics as a variation of real estate or reality television — a field where the players are sorted not so much as combatants on opposing teams (though they may compete at times) but on a hierarchy of success, with the big stars at the top sharing interests in common. His vague boasts that his presidency would create terrific things that everybody loves and is... a version of how he truly sees the world (op cit).

The possibility that Trump might be able to arrive at a pragmatically considered position was simply outside his abilities to do so, according to Chait—as Trump's efforts to reform healthcare revealed.

Moreover, Chait is especially revealing of the flaws in Gingrich's argument that Trump should be understood was a pragmatist. As we have noted, according to Gingrich, Trump would fix problems that had previously appeared to be intractable and indeed oftentimes esoteric, and he would do so by using a common-sense business-like approach to politics to 'fix' and obtain a 'deal'. The implication was that Trump had an ability to reduce politics objectively to its component parts—certainly the mantra 'I can fix it' dispensed with any suggestion that politics might be complicated. Paul Waldman (2016) explains that political pragmatism involves 'incremental change' and is based on a 'fundamental examination of what drives the system' and 'a realistic assessment of what can be accomplished'. And, moreover, pragmatic solutions to problems can be achieved only if they are 'practical, realistic and born of experience' (op cit). But, as Chait (2017a) anticipated, Trump's understanding of politics and the political process was limited and as Trump himself would reveal he neither understood what drove politics and the political process much less the value of incremental change. Consequently, Trump's so-called pragmatism, as revealed by his proposed reforms to the ACA, would amount to little more than 'pretending the solution might reveal itself over time and would be extremely easy' (Chait, 2017b). As Chait (op cit) has argued, this was explained by Trump's 'refusal to engage with the substance of the issue, in the magical belief that it could all be waved away'. Kruse (2018) draws a similar conclusion noting that Trump's 'zero-sum mindset resulted in an inability to understand nuanced policy interests.'

Malhotra and Moore (2016) summarise Trump's pragmatic approach to politics explaining that:

> Trump has now crafted his own neo-Orwellian approach to politics, combining shamelessly blatant contradiction with the allure of unapologetic self-confidence. In the short term, such bravado can help leaders gain support, as we have witnessed in Trump's ascendancy during the primaries. But that support withers when the veneer of self-assurance slips to reveal reckless overconfidence and a lack of substance.

<u>Conclusion</u>

> This guy's a buffoon, a reality-TV star, not even an amateur politician, not a politician at all, there's nothing serious about any of his ideas or any of his program, therefore no serious person could possibly support him or make an argument on his behalf (Zerofsky, 2022).

This coruscating quote comes from Michael Anton[124], a right-wing intellectual from the Claremont Institute[125] who, in a 2022 interview with the journalist Elisabeth Zerofsky, was reflecting on the challenge then faced by the right after Trump had become the nominee of the Republican Party. Indeed, political commentators of all hues would ponder whether Trump could rise to the occasion of becoming president—and these questions would become more pressing as his candidacy gained momentum. Admittedly, some comfort could be drawn from the likelihood that, if elected, the office of president would ameliorate some of Trump's worst tendencies—and, with his business background, it was hoped he might become the shrewd dealmaker and effective chief executive he claimed to be (Sabato, 2017, p. 3). However, as Anton's ruminations reflect, could a serious argument be made for Trump given his idiosyncratic candidacy? As we have seen, this was the challenge that the likes of Newt Gingrich, Victor Davis Hanson and others would fail to meet.

Anton goes someway to explaining why Trump is misunderstood, in an article titled *Toward a Sensible, Coherent Trumpism* (2016b).[126] For Anton the explanation is simple: Trumpism requires defining because it is an 'inchoate and incomplete' concept (ibid). And, moreover, as Anton explains, it would remain an inchoate and incomplete concept because Trump 'himself could not provide [a definition].' For Anton, Trump was not a 'man of ideas' and, furthermore, he was, according to Anton's analysis, singularly 'unsuited to the task of thinking through what his popularity means or how to build on it'. Anton concludes that this task is for 'others to do' (op cit). This is precisely what the likes of Gingrich and Hanson had set out to do.

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[124] Later, during the 2016 campaign, writing under the pseudonym of Publius Decius Mus—the pen name of a Roman general who sacrificed himself in battle—Anton became an anonymous pamphleteer making an inflammatory case for electing Trump, as a way he said, of blowing up a complacent and failing system, where both parties were complicit in a foreign policy that had flopped, and a domestic situation so perilous America was "headed over the cliff." It was, he wrote, "The Flight 93 Election," and the times were so dire that Americans had no choice but to charge the cockpit under Trump's unconventional banner, even if the plane crashed (Glasser, 2016). Anton would briefly serve in the Trump administration as Deputy Assistant to the President for Strategic Communications.

[125] The Claremont Institute is a right-wing think tank. According to the Institute's website their mission is to 'restore the principles of the American Founding to their rightful, preeminent authority in our life'.

[126] Anton more often writes under the pseudonym *Publius Decius Mus*. In the Trump administration he served briefly as a deputy assistant to the president for strategic communications.

Notably, Anton's article was dated March 2016, eight months before the presidential election yet, despite the passage of some seven years which saw Trump win the 2016 election and now, at the time of writing, after the end of his administration and with the prospect of another successfully winning the GOP nomination for 2024, there is a plausible case for arguing that Trumpism still remains an unrealised and incoherent concept.[127]

Anton's argument amounted to a startling admission—he was arguing that Trump's candidacy amounted to nothing more than an 'as yet unformed and instinct-driven platform' (op cit) that was shorn of policy ideas and wanting for an underlying ideology that would comprehensibly explain Trump and his politics. Anton seemed to be arguing that Trump was responsible for creating a narrative that evaded complexity. However, Anton's summation fails to consider the alarming prospect that if his analysis was indeed correct and Trumpism was 'inchoate and incomplete' it was because it defied easy definition—in other words it was an amorphous and fragmentary concept and, as this paper argues, it would remain so. Indeed, Harper and Schaaf (2018) draw a similar conclusion—according to them 'Trump's ideas did not emerge victorious in the marketplace of ideas' (p. 257). Anton's article was revealing in other ways: it chimed with the views of most liberal commentators and academics—and indeed those of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic establishment who were baffled that a presidential candidate could succeed in the absence of a detailed policy platform or indeed any real understanding of politics and the political process.[128] Diane Heith (2021, p. 1) captures this bafflement:

> to say that Donald Trump's presidential campaign was unexpected [wa]s a massive understatement… [a] businessman running for president quickly became the least unusual aspect of the Trump candidacy, becoming a footnote to the style, promises and approach Donald Trump offered.

To paraphrase Heith; the question was where to locate Trump's politics amidst the *style* and *promises*—a question that was complicated and compounded by Trump's apparent indifference to convention and his disreputable record as an anti-establishment renegade.

Anton's concerns about Trump had a wide currency. The consensus among most political observers and intellectuals was that Trump had little or no interest in politics—indeed it is worthy of note that Trump never claimed a detailed knowledge or understanding of his own policies. As Kelefa Sanneh (2017) explains

> It may seem absurd to speak of Trumpism when Trump himself does not speak of Trumpism. Indeed, Trump's surprising popularity is perhaps most surprising insofar

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[127] It is notable that Anton has not followed up his article with an argument to the contrary.

[128] Allen & Parnes (2017) who chronicle the bafflement that beset the Clinton campaign.

as it appears to have been attained in the absence of anything approximating a Trumpian intellectual persuasion or conventionally partisan organization.

Michael Wolff (2022) drew much the same conclusion about Trump's interest in politics and the political process, remarking

> having written three books in less than four years about Mr. Trump, with near constant input from his closest aides and friends, as well as hours of rambling from him, I have come to [conclude]: that there is almost never any true plan, strategy or forethought in Trump world and that everyone around him lives in the prison of his monologues, which allow for no interruptions or reality checks and overrule any plans others have tried to make. His fixations, misunderstandings and contempt for better minds that might correct him reign.[129]

We know that Trump would endlessly bloviate about *problems* besetting the country—yet, paradoxically, he appeared not the least interested in developing detailed political solutions to these problems other than to solipsistically argue that 'he alone' was the answer (Danner, 2016). However, this is not to say that Trump's expositions on the problematic state of America were not ideological. They patently were, despite Trump's incomprehensible and byzantine logic that resided in an infirmity of purpose about how to lend substance to his positions. The slogan *Make America Great Again* exemplified the problem because as Jonathan Chait had argued (2016, 2017a, 2017b) Trump was uniquely unqualified to explain what it meant or how it might be achieved. Add to this a mingling of ignorance, amorality and nationality, blended with a long-cherished narrative of grievance and victimhood and, as presidential historian Larry Sabato (2017, p. 3) explains, you are left to conclude that 'Trump's world begins and ends with Trump himself'. As Michael Anton rightly observed, Trump 'defie[d] conventional political analysis' (Drew, 2016a).[130] He was, according to Robert Costa (2017, p. 108), 'a heterodoxic presidential candidate' who, remarkably, had 'willed his way to the nomination' by running 'a campaign on gut instinct and little organisation.'

Consequently, a consensus would emerge about Trump's candidacy, focused primarily on Trump's lack of relevant experience, his poor temperament and his willingness to adopt contradictory and sometimes reckless policies (Sabato, 2017, p. 3). However, like everything to do with Trump these concerns were far from exhaustive but would, nevertheless, attract considerable traction among commentators and academics because they had much to recommend them yet, significantly, they missed a far more important aspect of Trump's candidacy which the right was quick to recognise. Anton's description of Trump as a buffoon

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[129] While Wolff was writing after the end of the Trump administration but deemed worthy of inclusion here because of the compelling insight he offers.

[130] Drew (2016a) describes Trump's policy positions as *intangible*—explaining that he operates 'to his own rules.'

gives some indication about what the right's priorities were—and they were not concerned with matters such as Trump's lack of experience, poor temperament or indeed his idiosyncratic policy positions but rather, as Michael Anton explained to Elisabeth Zerofsky, they were concerned with the question of how to turn Trump into 'a legitimate candidate of necessary change' (Zerofsky, 2022). The problem, as Anton alluded to in his description of Trump as a buffoon, was how to develop 'an ideological framework [that would] explain Trump's grab bag of economic populism, big-stick nationalism and… political incorrectness' (Thrush, 2016) and 'translate… [it]… into a lasting, durable exercise that could sustain his presidency' (Costa and Rucker, 2015).[131] That this undertaking by the right went largely unnoticed is perhaps attributable to the widely held view that Trump's idiosyncratic behaviour would undermine his candidacy (Gambino, 2015; Johnson, 2011). Consequently, little attention was given to what Glenn Thrush (2016) describes as an attempt 'to domesticate Trump'. According to Kelefa Sanneh (2017) the problem could be explained by the fact that:

> There is a profoundly asymmetrical relationship between Trump and the Trumpist intellectuals, who must formulate their doctrine without much assistance from its namesake; Trump's political brand is based on his being the kind of guy who would never feel the need to explain himself to a bunch of scholars, no matter how supportive they were.

It was into this political milieu that right-wing thinkers and writers entered in order to lend Trumpism what Sanneh describes as 'an ideological foundation'. However, the question that would dog these efforts was whether this could be anything more than 'an exercise in pretending that Trump's sow's ear [was] really…a silk purse' (op cit) because it would be premised on the idea that Trump's 'unpredictable remarks and seemingly disparate proposals… conceal[ed] a relatively coherent theory of governance' (op cit).

Laura Field (2021) explains that 'an effective political movement needs intellectual leadership to organise and explain the movement's purposes and goals.' Trump was unable to provide this leadership, for the reasons elaborated upon in this chapter and the previous chapter. We can conclude that Trump is not a pragmatist, nor indeed would pragmatism serve as an explanatory framework for our understanding of Trumpism. Moreover, perhaps more revealingly, contained within these attempts by the right to lend Trump ideological credibility was, as Michael Anton has argued, an implied acknowledgement that Trump was ideologically and politically illiterate—something which the left would fail to recognise as the next chapter explains.

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[131] They were commenting on Roger Stone's early attempts to lend Trump and Trumpism ideological coherence.

Chapter 4

The previous chapters examined whether Donald Trump was a conviction politician who subscribed to a meaningful political ideology, as some on the right had suggested. According to Newt Gingrich (2017a, 2017b), for example, a pro-Trump advocate, Trump's theatrics—his disregard for manners and his flouting of the establishment rules were in fact the actions of an astute and shrewd politician who deliberately eschewed conventional behaviour. Gingrich would contend, as indeed others had argued, that Trump's disregard for convention were a disguise: in fact Trump was a principled common-sense politician whose politics drew on such Jacksonian values as family, custom and commonsense pragmatism.[132] However, as the previous chapters detailed, these edulcorated arguments were found wanting and, after careful analysis, the chapter concluded that Trump did not subscribe to a coherent ideology—rather, his political beliefs, if indeed such a description could be applied to Trump, were untethered and incoherent despite all arguments to the contrary from those on the right.[133]

Trump's critics would agree with the aforementioned analysis. However, when critiquing Trump, they appear unable to relinquish the idea that Trump's incoherence might be exactly that. Instead, they too feel compelled to approach Trump as if he were a conventional politician—a politician with a discernible ideology whose incoherence is a ploy to disguise his real intentions. This paradox explains why Trump is often misunderstood and, since he continues to matter, it is important to try and discern how these misunderstandings have arisen. Indeed, we might sum up this chapter as an attempt to answer a conundrum posed by Maggie Haberman at the conclusion of her book, *Confidence Man: The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America* (2022), when she wrote:

> I spent four years of his presidency getting asked by people to decipher why he was doing what he was doing, but the truth is, ultimately, almost no one knows him... he is simply, purely opaque, permitting people to read meaning and depth into every action, no matter how empty they may be (p. 508).

Haberman goes to the heart of what this chapter seeks to achieve—to decipher Trump.

Charles Lamb and Jacob Neiheisel (2020b, p. 3) are equally perplexed by Trump and his presidency. According to them, the 'Trump presidency... defied explanation.' Furthermore, much of the animadversion that Trump has been subject 'offered little in the way of a guide

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[132] The classicist and military historian, Victor Davis Hanson, has variously set out what he calls 'the case for Trump' (2017a, 2019, 2020a and 2020b).

[133] It could be argued that the right's attempt to tether Trump to something like a coherent and explicable ideology was, of itself, an acknowledgement that Trumpism was incoherent.

for understanding [Trump's] approach to the office' (op cit). This might be explained by the fact that Trump's critics had misunderstood him and his presidency—as this chapter contends. However, in order to decipher Trump, as Maggie Haberman suggests, it is important to understand how and why Trump's critics have misunderstood him. The journalist David Roberts (2017) summarised the problem with considerable prescience when he wrote: 'we badly want to understand Trump, to grasp him [because] it might give us some sense of control or at least predict what he will do next'. Roberts goes on to explain that 'much of the dialogue around [Trump]… amounts to a desperate attempt to construct a *Theory of Trump*, to explain what he does and says through some story about his long-term goals and beliefs' (op cit).

Like David Roberts, Haberman is rightly perplexed, because so much has been written about Trump we should *know* him, yet, as Haberman reminds us, he remains elusive. The journalist Leonard Pitts (2016) comes closest to explaining why Trump is so misunderstood. Pitts explains Trump's opaqueness by arguing that his behaviour 'provides redundant proof that there is no there, there.' For Pitts, 'Trump is formless, a cloud sculpted by the breeze, like water taking the shape of the glass.' Pitts' comments highlight the problem that Trump's critics labour under, which is a propensity to 'read meaning and depth' (Haberman, op cit) into Trump's every action. In fact, the contrary is true—as Pitts rightly concludes, Trump is far from opaque, as the chapter will explain.

Evan Osnos (2022) explains how Trump's critics approached his candidacy and, latterly, his presidency—and, in doing so, Osnos gives us an indication about how, for his critics, Trump became a challenging study. Osnos writes that 'even before Trump entered the White House, the sheer fact of his candidacy had raised awareness [among Trump's critics] of [his] catastrophic potential' (p. 283). What, exactly, this catastrophic potential amounted to would be the source of a burgeoning literary canon that aimed to deconstruct and explain Trump (Perlberg, 2018; Szalai, 2020). As Carlos Lozada (2020c, p. 15) explains, Trump's unexpected election was 'a shock to the political establishment.' This 'shock' to America's intellectual class would have a galvanizing effect— 'writers, thinkers, activists, academics and journalists' were under a compulsion to understand what Trump's election would mean for America. Lozada describes this literary outpouring as 'a publishing phenomenon' cataloguing everything from:

> Dissections of heartland voters. Manifestos of political resistance. Polemics on the fate of conservatism. Works on gender and identity. Memoirs of race and protest.

> Reports of White House chaos. Studies on the institution of the presidency. Predictions about the fate of American democracy (2020c, p. 15). [134]

Trump's critics would variously argue that he was an authoritarian, a right-wing populist, an economic nationalist, a fascist—and sometimes a combination of some or all of these labels. Notably, these labels shared a theme—which, when summarised, was that Trump posed a threat to democracy (Edsall, 2021). However, when these arguments are pared back, they are revealing of something wider, that can be traced to Trump's well documented disregard for the truth (Kessler, Rizzo & Kelly, 2020) which, according to Professor Patrick Boucheron (2020), was a hallmark of a Machiavellian politician who, by Trump's own admission, was willing 'to win at any cost' (Stein, 2017). Trump's business philosophy foretold of a president who was versed in the dark arts of 'Machiavellian deception' (Nye, 2018). This chapter commences by asking if these comparisons can be substantiated; how these comparisons with Machiavelli have arisen and why they are revealing of a fundamental misunderstanding about Trump and his politics and, more especially, just how Trump's critics have come to misunderstand him and indeed why, for some, he appears opaque. The aim then, is to decipher Trump and his politics.

The Art of Machiavelli

In very simple terms, we begin with the premise that Machiavelli has been misunderstood—however this misunderstanding—a common misconception that Machiavellianism is concerned with obtaining and retaining power by any means necessary—has seen a revival because of the emergence of Trump to whom the label Machiavellian is often misapplied. But, as I will argue, this is to both misunderstand Machiavelli and, importantly, Trump. In other words, Trump's politics have all the outward appearances of an authoritarian but, because of his inability to harness the role of president or understand how politics works his authoritarianism is thwarted. Trump is, in effect, his own worst enemy—as the chapter will explain. Furthermore, the chapter will explain why Trump was a thwarted president which, in turn, can be explained by the fact that Trump's presidency was, in effect apolitical.

This chapter begins by considering whether Trump can be called a Machiavellian politician and, as this debate unfolds, it will draw on the question about how and indeed why political theorists and commentators alike have misunderstood Machiavelli and how this misunderstanding becomes important to our understanding of Donald Trump and his presidency. The chapter examines Trump through the lens of his critics to determine whether Machiavelli can be applied to our understanding of Trump and his presidency—and,

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[134] As some have noted, it is ironic that a president who has made a virtue of reading very little (Graham, 2018; Bump, 2017) should have 'inspired a deluge of books about his tenure in the White House' (Szalai, 2020; Lozada, 2020b).

in doing so, we will keep returning to the question of whether Trump is a Machiavellian politician.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'Machiavellianism' refers to someone who is 'cunning, scheming and unscrupulous in politics.' Professor Robert Zaretsky (2016), a well-known scholar of Machiavelli and a critic of Trump notes that

> commentators have ranged far and wide looking for historical precedents in their efforts to describe the rise of Donald Trump from the conservative *Weekly Standard and Forbes* to the liberal *Huffington Post* and *Washington Post*, pundits tell us that *The Prince* explains [Trump's] success.

In their book, *Unmaking of the Presidency: Donald Trump's War on the World's Most Powerful Office*, Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes (2020) have written that 'the overriding message of Trump's life and of his [presidential] campaign was that kindness is weakness, manners are for wimps, and the public interest is for suckers' (p. 7). This description of Trump has echoes of Machiavelli who advised his titular sixteenth century Prince 'to pursue a path of power aggregation and consolidation by any means—because: politics have no relation to morals' (Rawlings, 2019). For many of Trump's critics the proposition that morality has no role to play in politics perfectly captured and embodied the essence of Donald Trump who, they would claim, was a modern-day Machiavelli (Ignatius, 2016; Sano, 2017; Glasser, 2017; Scott, 2023).

Indeed, we should not be surprised to learn that in *The Art of the Deal* (1987) Trump goes to considerable lengths to portray himself as having Machiavellian nous—attributes he would later cite as evidence for why he would to be a good president (2015b). Indeed, he would claim 'our country needs a truly great leader... we need a leader that wrote *The Art of the Deal*' (Alexander, 2016; Beauchamp, 2017; Flores, 2016).

Professor Harvey Mansfield (2016, 2017), an authority on the work of Machiavelli, explains how Trump came to be compared with Machiavelli—for Mansfield, it could be explained by the fact that Trump was willing to 'win dishonourably rather than lose honourably.' In a review of *The Art of the Deal* Zach Beauchamp (2016a)[135] explains the following:

> What you learn about Trump from reading *The Art of the Deal* is that he doesn't see deals as business transactions so much as measures of one's success at life. If that's the case, then you're justified in doing anything—*anything*—to make sure you come

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[135] Beauchamp's 2016 review of *The Art of the Deal*—nearly thirty years after its publication, is revealing of the fact that in the intervening years Trump had largely been dismissed as an irrelevance.

out on top. Perhaps not surprisingly, Beauchamp describes *The Art of the Deal* as a 'Rosetta stone' for understanding Trump's politics.[136]

It would appear that Trump's 'win at any cost' philosophy exemplified his Machiavellian disregard for political orthodoxy which, for his critics, were affronts to 'institutional precedent, legal restraint [and] civic decency' (Conrad, 2020b).

Mansfield (2017) makes the point that 'if we are to accept the hypothesis of [Trump's] Machiavellian shrewdness' then 'we could suppose that Trump has deliberately chosen a strategy of speaking beyond normal bounds [to achieve his purposes]'. Mansfield is proposing that Trump's unorthodox style of speaking and communicating is deliberate—it is, in other words, a rhetorical tool that, as a so-called Machiavellian politician, Trump deploys to achieve his ends (Abbas, 2019; Baan, 2017; Goldhill, 2017; Danner, 2016). Furthermore, according to Mansfield's thesis, Trump's rhetorical flourishes had a wider context—narrowly deployed his rhetoric has no power but if deployed as part of a wider strategy, by speaking 'beyond normal bounds', its purpose becomes clearer. If Mansfield is correct, we can infer that Trump's rhetoric is more than just sophistry—it is part of a strategy that deserves to be described as *Machiavellian*. According to Mansfield, therefore, Trump is a deliberative politician—someone whose style of communicating is purposeful and considered but disguised to appear otherwise and, like Machiavelli's *Prince*, Trump uses language to hide his real intentions. If indeed this is the case, then Trump is not the enigmatically opaque politician that Maggie Haberman describes. In fact, he is anything but opaque according to this characterisation. Furthermore, if indeed Mansfield is correct, we are resigned to conclude that Trump is a wily and unscrupulous strategist. According to the political philosopher Peter Adamson (2019) 'Machiavelli [appeared] to be analysing Trump's political success five hundred years before the fact.'

These arguments have considerable traction among commentators who, like Mansfield, consider Trump to be a Machiavellian politician. For example, the renown philosopher and social commentator Slavoj Žižek has argued that Trump's deficiencies as a politician are simply a ploy (Browne, 2016). Will Rahn (2016) takes a similar line, according to him Trump's propensity to opaqueness is a Machiavellian subterfuge, a far from opaque ploy he uses to realise his political ends. Jannik Sano (2017) goes further, according to him '[Trump] understands what must be done for him to have power and he succeeds in this. As such, he is a perfect example of Machiavelli's ideas.' Sano goes onto argue that Trump understands 'that truth and facts don't always matter.' In a book review about Machiavelli and leadership Professor Robert Zaretsky (2016) describes Trump's disregard for the truth as a 'proclivity to

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[136] In *Trump 101: The Way to Success* (2006), Trump claims that Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, is one of his favourite books.

present truth as lies' which, he notes, is regarded by some as a quality Machiavelli admired in a politician. Sano argues that 'the comparison[s] [between] Trump and Machiavelli [are] obvious.' The writer and commentator David Ignatius (2016) makes much the same argument when explaining that in Trump 'you will find many of the qualities the cynical Machiavelli thought were essential [in a politician]'. For example, Professor Joseph Nye (2018) explains that 'Machiavellian deception is often part of a strategy in bargaining to get a deal, and Trump claims to be a master of that art.' Nye goes on to explain 'that the frequency, repetition and blatant nature of [Trump's] lies reflect not a habit but a deliberate political strategy to damage institutions associated with truth'. For these critics, some of whom are distinguished academics, Trump's 'win at any cost' philosophy, his willingness to deliver lies with the utmost passion and commitment was strongly suggestive of someone who deployed deceit as part of a wider political strategy. In effect these writers were arguing that Trump's lies had a wider purpose—even if that purpose was not sometimes immediately clear. Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes (2020) make this same point when arguing that Trump was insidiously and deliberately remaking the presidency in his own image which they explain in the following way:

> when you behave in a certain way over a long period of time… it is because you are actually proposing something. And you may not be aware of the theoretical implications of what you are proposing, you may not have theorized it at all, but you are proposing an idea of what the presidency looks like (p. 5).

Nye's point about Trump's lies is important to this discussion—if indeed Trump uses lies as a deliberate strategy we must ask if this reading of Machiavelli is correct—put simply, is Trump a Machiavellian who uses lies in a strategic way, as Nye contends? More pointedly, is Trump remaking the presidency in his own image, as Henessey and Wittes have argued? Moreover, while these comparisons have flourished little thought appears to have been given to the proposition that Trump's lies may not be the working of a modern-day Machiavelli. Whether these arguments can be sustained is very much dependent on our understanding of Machiavelli.

In her book in her book, *Be Like the Fox: Machiavelli's Lifelong Quest for Freedom*, Professor Erica Benner (2017a), argues that Machiavelli is 'a much-misunderstood subject' (p. xxii). In two later articles (2017b, 2017c), written in the wake of Trump's election, she explains why Machiavelli has been misunderstood and why this misunderstanding has persisted—and, more especially, why comparisons with Trump appear to be so compelling to so many. She writes:

> If you're a political outsider who wants to move fast to the top job in a democracy, how do you do it? You could start by dipping into a book [*The Prince*] written 500 years ago by an out-of-pocket Italian civil servant. The quickest way it says is to have

fortune on your side from the outset, with plenty of inherited money and a leg up through family connections. If lying and breaking your oaths help you crush the opposition, so be it. Make the people your best friend. Promise to protect their interests against predatory elites and foreigners. Fan partisan hatreds so that you alone seem to rise above them, to be the saviour of the fatherland (2017b).

Benner (2017b, 2017c) explains that comparisons between Machiavelli and Trump are erroneous but, like much that has been attributed to Machiavelli, these comparisons are explained by the fact that Machiavelli's wrote in a way that was 'veiled in irony and contradiction'. Consequently, Machiavelli's ambiguity and 'a failure to read [Machiavelli] properly' have resulted in the now modern-day misconception about who Machiavelli was and, more especially, what he was advocating. As a result, Machiavelli is commonly thought to have produced 'a rulebook for today's cynical populists and authoritarians' (2017b). To understand the problem, we need look no further than the dictionary definition of Machiavellianism which, she argues, is revealing of the depth of this misunderstanding. Benner's point is a simple one: we should be vigilant against received wisdom.

Like Benner, Professor Maurizio Viroli (2016) is, at lengths to rehabilitate Machiavelli from the erroneous comparisons with Trump. According to Viroli, in a riposte to Harvey Mansfield, 'Donald Trump has cashed Niccolò Machiavelli's political support'. In Viroli's opinion Machiavelli would 'consider Trump a very poor pupil, if, he truly believes that to be a good Machiavellian, one must endorse the view that to win dishonourably is better than to lose honourably.' Indeed, Viroli suggests Trump read Machiavelli 'because [he had] never written, or implied, that winning dishonourably is better than losing honourably'. As Benner (2017a, 2017b) explains, Machiavelli should be read as *warning* against populist or authoritarian leaders—in this regard Benner was specifically referring to Trump. She explains that Machiavelli's work was in fact a subtle but nonetheless compelling exposé of populist authoritarian leaders and the dangers they pose to democracy and, furthermore, she contends, while

> it might seem perverse to seek help from a man routinely portrayed in popular culture as an adviser muttering darkly in politicians' ears, telling them to use shrewdly crafted appearances—lies and spin—to control people's minds and actions. It's true that Machiavelli sets out this arch-manipulator's path to power in his *Prince—but only to highlight its follies* (2017b).

Benner (2017a) proceeds to explain that what Machiavelli teaches us is that true political success can only be achieved by 'low-key diplomacy and long-range solutions to complicated problems,' which, as she details, is the antithesis of Donald Trump's politics.

So, what does any of this tell us? We may firstly conclude that Machiavelli has been misunderstood. Oddly, Machiavelli is not the Machiavellian he is often thought to be.

Secondly, Machiavelli cannot be a guide to understanding the politics of Donald Trump—rather, Machiavelli was warning us about authoritarian politicians (Albertini, 2018; Doyle 2017; Illing, 2018; McManus, 2017; Sahlins, 2017; White, 2017; Zuckert, 2018). Notably, David Ignatius (2016), a *Washington Post* columnist, would argue in an opinion piece that 'Trump is the American Machiavelli' yet, six months after penning this article, Ignatius felt compelled to revise his opinion of Trump in a 2017 column titled 'Trump is Not So Machiavellian After All.' Ignatius' volte-face turned on the prosaic realisation that, 'as a serial fabricator', Trump's penchant for lying had no higher political purpose. In other words, Trump was not the Machiavellian politician Ignatius has understood him to be.

Trump's proclivity for lying meant that his critics would be reluctant to relinquish the narrative that he was a Machiavellian politician who was versed in the dark arts of obtaining and retaining power. This form of reasoning inheres to much that has been written about Trump by his critics. Eric Levitz (2020) describes this form of reasoning as 'tyrannophobia',[137] a belief that liberal freedoms and institutions are under threat which, as Samuel Moyn and David Priestland (2017) explain, was given a new lease because Trump appeared 'to pose an imminent threat to liberal democracy in America'. This, they argue, resulted from a 'fearful reaction to Mr. Trump's election' and, more especially, his 'frequent breaches of political norms' which, as we have seen, were regarded as some sort of Machiavellian device.

Professor Iwan Morgan (2022) in his book, *FDR*, attributes Machiavellian qualities to President Franklin Roosevelt but the difference between the Machiavellian Roosevelt and the Machiavellian Trump could not be clearer. Roosevelt's Machiavellian qualities were tempered, deliberative and purposeful in pursuit of his policy aims, as Morgan explains, '[FDR] could be wilful, truthless and mendacious in the cold skill with which he played the political game' (2020, p. 3). According to Morgan, Roosevelt was content to use 'the smokescreen of principle to camouflage [his] power play[s] (ibid, p. 132). Morgan's point is that Roosevelt was deploying what we call his Machiavellian qualities as a means to an end rather than as an end itself. As Eric Alterman writes in his book *When Presidents Lie* (2004) '[Roosevelt] liked to call himself a juggler' who 'never let my right hand know what my left hand was doing' (2004, p. 17). Roosevelt was, as Alterman explains, perfectly willing to 'mislead and tell untruths' (op cit).[138] For the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1967) 'lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the

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[137] Tyrannophobia is not a new concept. For a detailed discussion of tyrannophobia see: Posner & Vermeule, 2009.

[138] This sort of deceit is sometimes referred to by the legal term as *suppressio veri*—which means the misrepresenting of truth by withholding of relevant facts (Oborne, 2023).

demagogue's but also of the statemen's trade'. In the person of Franklin D. Roosevelt these so-called Machiavellian qualities were part of a wider strategy which, no doubt, Machiavelli would have endorsed. However, there is no evidence that Donald Trump's mendaciousness, his sometimes-byzantine policy changes or else his 'constant helter-skelter stream-of-consciousness commentary' (Harrington & Waddan, 2020, p. 199) have any strategic or ideological purpose much less are they aimed at keeping his opponents off balance, as practiced by Roosevelt. As Nye (2018) simply concludes, 'Trump lies out of habit'. Trump is, it seems, a habitual and shameless liar—for which he is neither Machiavellian nor indeed is it likely that he would attract Machiavelli's endorsement. Professor Sefano Albertini (2018) makes a telling point: Trump 'has neither the clarity of judgment, the depth of analysis, the political intuition, nor the sublime use of language of the Florentine Secretary'.

David Ignatius' (2017) recantation is illustrative. If we understand Machiavelli correctly, the Machiavellian adjective has little or no application to Trump (Benner, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). However, notwithstanding this, even if we were to accept that comparisons could made, they become unsustainable under close examination. As we saw earlier, David Ignatius (2016) had concluded that Trump was '*the* American Machiavelli'. His argument was framed by Trump's lies which, according to Ignatius, was evidence of Trump's Machiavellian tendencies. Jannik Sano (2017) had similarly claimed that what distinguished Trump as a Machiavellian was that he 'understood that facts and truth don't always matter'. However, both Sano and Ignatius make the erroneous mistake of misunderstanding Machiavelli—as Benner has explained. They then compound this mistake by assuming that Trump's well documented propensity to lie was the evidence of someone who, versed in the dark arts of manipulation, purposely and astutely deployed deception for some higher political purpose. Yet, as we have seen, less than six months later, Ignatius (2017) felt compelled to write:

> [that after] further consideration, I don't think that Trump, with his braggadocio and contempt for fact, really embodies the spirit of virtue that Machiavelli regarded as essential for political success.

Rejecting his earlier argument (2016) that Trump was an 'American Machiavelli, Ignatius is subsequently compelled to describe Trump as 'the anti-Machiavelli'. Ignatius's reversal is revealing—he had, perhaps understandably, assumed that Trump's propensity for lying was evidence of a Machiavellian approach to politics. But, as Ignatius appears to realise, Trump's braggadocio and contempt for the truth had no strategic or ideological value much less do they have any political purpose. This point becomes clearer when we consider the works of historian Eric Alterman (2004, 2020) who has written a detailed history of (post-war) presidential lying. According to Alterman lies and deceptions have 'an old and venerable tradition in statecraft' (2004, p. 12). Alterman's referencing of *statecraft* is important to our

wider discussion about Trump and Machiavelli. According to Alterman 'presidents who do not lie... have been the exception, not the rule' (2004, p. 5). Alterman argues that the successful exercise of statecraft—which is what Machiavelli was at lengths to demonstrate—will, invariably, place presidents in a conundrum about telling the truth in pursuit of their policy objectives. Alterman describes this has 'a matter of advancing [a particular] narrative designed to justify [a particular end]' (2004, p. 6). However, in Alterman's later book, which deals specifically with the presidency of Donald Trump, titled *Lying in State: Why Presidents Lie and Why Trump is Worse (*2020), Alterman argues that the lies told by the forty-fifth president are of a different order and magnitude (Lozada, 2018 & 2020a; Kessler, Rizzo & Kelly, 2020)—indeed Alterman opens his argument by unequivocally stating that 'the depth and breadth of Trump's dishonesty is something decidedly new' (2020, p. 1). Alterman explains that 'the difference between Trump and previous presidential liars lay in the fact that... his predecessors lied in pursuit of goals consistent with their pronounced policy objectives and philosophies' (ibid, p. 244).[139] This is an important point and one that is often missed when trying to understand Trump and his presidency: Trump's lies have no purpose—they are not, as Alterman explains, an expedient entered into as an expression of statecraft or indeed anyway related to the exercise of statecraft and, moreover, 'there is no particular pattern to Trump's dishonesty' (op cit). In other words, Trump lies because he can and has done so for much of his life—this is how he communicates and engages with the wider world (Schwartz, 2017). Alterman concludes his analysis by stating that 'Trump is a pathological liar' (2020, p. 244) and, as such, he is markedly different to his predecessors.

James Pfiffner's paper, *The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy* (2020), is particularly helpful here.[140] Pfiffner is a highly regarded historian of the presidency who has written a number of well-received papers (2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022) critically analysing Trump and his administration therefore his arguments carry some weight. In his paper, Pfiffner categorises Trump's lies under the following headings: (i) trivial lies; (ii) self-aggrandizing lies; (iii) egregious lies and (iv) lies intended to deceive the public.

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[139] Alterman makes an exception about President Nixon and his role in the Watergate cover-up.

[140] In his 2020 paper Pfiffner is a to lengths to categorise presidential lying and in doing so place Trump's lies in context—or taxonomy.

For the purposes of this analysis Pfiffner's fourth category of lie—*lies intended to deceive the public* (2020, p. 22) are examined here.[141] [142] Unlike the three other categories this category of lie is indicative of a deliberative politician who uses lies in a calculated way to deceive the public. Like many of Trump's critics Pfiffner infers an intention on Trump's part. According to Pfiffner 'it was clear that [Trump] *intended* that his audience... believe his [lies]' (2020, p. 23).[143] There can be little doubt that Trump intends that his audience believe his lies however this is quite different to the argument that Trump *intends* to 'distort reality to his political advantage' as Pfiffner maintains (2020, p. 22). Pfiffner cites numerous lies told by Trump but is unable to offer evidence that these lies had any ideological or strategic purpose other than simply lying for the sake of lying—which is at odds with the premise that Trump intentionally deceives the public to his political advantage. Pfiffner identifies what he describes as a 'tautological logic' to Trump's lies. However, this does not mean that Trump knowingly deploys deception as a political tool. Again, Pfiffner makes the mistake of approaching Trump as if he were a conventional politician. But, as we know, Trump is not a conventional politician. For Trump the results of his lies have an incidental value—he is not the least concerned whether he is believed or not. Later, in the same paper, Pfiffner identifies the sources of Trump's lies—describing them as: 'conscious calculation, carelessness or self-delusion' (2020, p. 33). Yet, oddly, Pfiffner is wedded to the idea that Trump lies are attributable to conscious calculation when patently Trump's lies are mostly evidence of carelessness and self-delusion.

Pfiffner's aim is to demonstrate the debilitating effects that Trump's lies have had on the body politic of American democracy—none of which is disputed here. Like Eric Alterman, Pfiffner argues that Trump's lies 'differ significantly from previous presidential lies' (2020, p. 17). Pfiffner goes on to maintain that Trump's lies 'undermine the foundation of accountable government' (ibid, p. 19). Pfiffner reinforces his point about the dangers of Trump's lies explaining that they 'distort political reality' (ibid, p. 23) so that 'facts do not matter (ibid, p. 25). According to Pfiffner, Trump 'demonstrat[es] a disdain for objective reality and truth telling' (ibid, p. 29) which 'undermines the very possibility of rational discourse' (ibid, p. 31). These propositions are not at dispute—indeed Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes (2020a) make much the same argument in their book *Unmaking the Presidency*, which they subtitle *Donald Trump's War on the World's Most Powerful Office*. However, like Pfiffner,

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[141] For the sake of convenience *lies intended to deceive the public* is listed last of the four categories—however, in Pfiffner's taxonomy, it falls into the third category of lie.

[142] Despite Pfiffner's careful taxonomy his categories amount to a distinction without a difference—rather, they are revealing of a politician who has no understanding of politics which, like many of Trump's critics, Pfiffner fails to recognise.

[143] My italics.

they make the mistake of inferring that Trump is deliberately at war with the office of the presidency or else intentionally undermining the foundations of government, as Pfiffner contends. According to Hennessey and Wittes Trump had set out to unmake the presidency. However, as with Pfiffner's proposition that Trump's lies 'undermine the foundation[s] of accountable government' this firstly presupposes that Trump consciously intended such an outcome—and there is no evidence of such an intent and, secondly, it presupposes or strongly infers, that Trump envisioned a remade presidency—about which also there is no evidence.

Pfiffner defines lies as 'egregious[ly] false statements that are demonstrably contrary to well-known facts' (2020, p. 18). This definition is not disputed. However, how it is applied to Trump and his proclivity for lying *is* disputed. Pfiffner's definition assumes that Trump understands what lying means—in other words, Trump commences with an understanding of the 'known facts' then wilfully lies about what *he knows*. Pfiffner goes on to state that 'Trump seemed to believe that as long as many people believe him, facts do not matter' (op cit). According to Pfiffner, Trump reveals himself as a politician who *knows* the difference between a lie and the truth. If we take Pfiffner's argument to its logical conclusion then Trump is a practitioner of what George Orwell (1948, p. 35) called 'doublethink':

> To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it... to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself — that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink.

Certainly, the evidence supports Pfiffner's argument that Trump's lies distorted reality to his political advantage. However, any advantage would appear incidental—an unintended consequence of Trump's predilection for lying. Rather, the evidence suggests that Trump's approach to politics is the very antithesis of someone who relies on 'carefully constructed lies' (ibid, p, 26). In fact, Trump's lies are anything but carefully constructed. Pfiffner, like other critics of Trump, is baffled by Trump's behaviour and in attempting to comprehend this behaviour, which runs contrary to conventional political wisdom, he infers that Trump is using deception as a political tool. However, from what we know about Trump, it is not at all clear that Trump understands the distinction between the truth and a lie. Furthermore, Pfiffner fails to deal with the fact that as a liar Trump would lie about why he lies. In failing

to make this distinction Pfiffner is left only to assume that Trump knows the difference between a lie and the truth.

In this regard Eric Alterman's work (2004, 2020) is valuable because his work undermines any suggestion that Trump is consciously or purposely lying as an instrument of statecraft. Indeed, Alterman concludes that Trump's lies are without precedent or, more prosaically, that 'Trump is an irredeemable liar' who is 'divorced from the rigours of truth and honesty' (Blow, 2018). As Hannah Arendt (1967) explained, we expect politicians to rely on evasion, to dissemble, to distract or use obfuscation. All of these methods can be attributed to Trump—however his lies are markedly different because he has no other method of communicating (Graham, 2019). Moreover, when caught in a lie, Trump's response is to 'double-down' on his earlier lie (Graham, 2019). This propensity hardly accords with the subtle manipulations of, for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Alterman moves to conclude that the only explanation for Trump's lying is that he is a 'bullshitter' (2020, p. 242).

Relying on the work of the philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005) for his definition of bullshit Alterman explains that a bullshitter is someone who 'does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose' (ibid, p. 12). Moreover, even if Trump deployed political deception strategically, to some recognisable purpose, his predilection for wantonly lying has not been without consequences—not only has Trump proven to his own worst enemy when, for example, it would have been easier to tell the truth than to lie, his lies have often led to him unnecessarily contradicting, undermining or otherwise compromising his own policy positions (Filipovic, 2020; Kruse and Weiland, 2016; Sargent, 2020). As Paul Fahri (2017) explains Trump's penchant for lying 'upstages his own agenda.' Fahri attributes this to Trump's 'unerring ability to get in the way of news that might be favourable to him and his agenda.' In sum, Trump is not concerned with the truth of what he says. This suggests that Trump's lies are of a different order—which, of course, makes it a challenge 'to follow [Trump's] chain of thought' (Baker, 2020).

Conclusion

Trump's predilection for lying would defy conventional political reason so much so that Trump's critics assumed this to be Machiavellian strategy. With this leap of logic Trump's critics had a basis for analysing Trump, Trumpism and the Trump administration. It was, for example, argued that Trump was unmaking the presidency by purposely undermining the guard rails that constrained the executive. But, as I argue, Trump was doing anything but. His opportunism did not extend further than an obsession with his own celebrity—a politics shorn of anything but concerns with short-term headlines. Jonathan Alter (2020), in his

biography of Jimmy Carter, places presidents in one of two schools: either they are romantics or else they are engineers. Trump was neither: he was a celebrity—a performative politician (Hutton, 2022). The settled view among many of Trump's critics was that he is first and foremost a modern-day Machiavelli. However, the evidence suggests that Trump is not a modern-day Machiavelli—a true reading of Machiavelli confirms this, as Erica Benner was at lengths to explain. This focus on Trump's lies is illustrative of the fact that Trump is not a strategic politician. If we contextualise what this means in terms of the wider thesis this becomes clearer: were Trump an ideological politician versed in political ideas we might plausibly advance an argument that his behaviour conforms to the Machiavellian adjective— but, as we have seen, Trump's so-called cunning, his scheming and unscrupulousness are without political purpose, and this is explained by the fact that his political views are ideologically untethered. However, and more importantly, conflating Trump with Machiavelli is illustrative of how and why Trump has been misunderstood by his many critics—who are not just journalists but oftentimes presidential historians and other academics.

What is being argued here is the proposition that Trump's lies are evidence of his inability to comprehend political ideas and arguments. To lend any other interpretation to Trump's lies logically leads to the erroneous conclusion that he is a Machiavellian politician. Indeed, when asked to explain himself or indeed his policies Trump's responses are often redolent of someone who has no grasp of politics—he resorts to what he knows best: he lies. Charles Blow (2018) describes this as 'reflexive reductionism.' According to Blow 'Donald Trump has a particular skill, one rooted in his weaknesses: because he eschews intellectualism for intuition, because he prefers to watch rather than to read, he has honed his talent for reflexive reductionism.' Blow goes on to explain that 'nuance and complexity are founts of confusion in Trump's basest mind. So, he gravitates to the most emotionally charged parts of any issue and amplifies them.' In other words, he lies. This is because he has no real comprehension of politics, political ideas or policy.

Trump's lies are explained by his transgressive approach to politics (McLaughlin, 2016). For example, Rafael Behr (2021) has written that Trump's proven disregard for the rules and conventions of politics is not evidence of a 'scheming tyrant' but rather, according to Behr, it the evidence of 'an absence of discipline and wilful shallowness.' Behr goes on to explain that Trump is 'too centred on himself to resemble a project of authoritarian statecraft… [because] he has no discernible comprehension of how [politics] works.' Behr's point is important. Unlike conventional politicians Trump lies because he does not understand the value of lying as a tool of political expediency—simply: he lies because this is what he does and has always done. Lying is a part of his personality—as Eric Alterman has explained (2020, p. 242). This

is something that Pfiffner and indeed other critics tend to ignore preferring instead to hold to an incommensurable position where, on the one hand, they recognise Trump's lying and indeed his lack of intellectual or organisation heft but, on the other hand, in their analyses of Trump, they are unable to relinquish the proposition that Trump might be nothing more than a carnival barker—a huckster—and, as such, Trump's critics appear impervious to any countervailing arguments, preferring instead to allow what Richard Ford (2015) describes as 'baseless verities to persist with the implacable force of truth.' In an email exchange [144], James Pfiffner wrote 'Trump acts instinctively, but also shrewdly.' Superficially, these conceptions of Trump appear consistent; however, on closer examination, they become difficult to reconcile. Pfiffner makes the mistake of arguing that Trump is shrewd when there is no evidence for his shrewdness—his predilection for lying, when it would be easier to tell the truth, is not the work of shrewd politician but rather, it is revealing of Trump's approach to politics: Trump's instincts take precedence—lying instinctively and for no sound reason is not shrewdness. Trump lies because he feels no duty to submit to the rules imposed on him and lies because breaking rules and refusing to admit the truth has been a reliable route to self-advancement in both the worlds of real estate and politics, where truth is a malleable concept. As Maria Konnikova (2017) explains, 'the sheer frequency, spontaneity and seeming irrelevance of [Trump's] lies have no precedent.' In a portrait of Trump, the psychologist and political scientist Dan McAdams (2020b) explains that 'Trump is a successful liar because… if you live in the current moment, then the future consequences of your lies will not matter to you.' McAdams' analysis explains Trump's behaviour. Intellectually, Trump is unable to engage in thinking politically nor has he ever done so. Free of ideology Trump engages in the moment. McAdams describes Trump as an 'episodic man' who lives each day in a 'temporary moment of time.' Thus, when confronted by political questions Trump is unable to explain what he doesn't know nor is he able to understand what he should know which leaves him utterly perplexed: the result manifests itself in lying. We might describe this as a form of cognitive dissonance. The consequence, as McAdams explains, is that Trump

> immerses himself in the angry, combative moment, striving desperately to win the moment. Like a boxer in the ring, he brings everything he has to the immediate episode, fighting furiously to come out on top. But the episodes do not add up. They do not form a narrative arc. In Trump's case, it is as if he wakes up each morning nearly oblivious to what happened the day before. What he said and did yesterday, in order to win yesterday, no longer matters to him. And what he will do today, in order to win today, will not matter for tomorrow (2020b)

McAdams' point is borne out by Trump's statements: he does not understand politics much less the political process because Trump suffers from what Katy Waldman (2017) describes as 'a fundamental absence of vision.' Consequently, as McAdams explains, Trump is

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[144] Email dated 15/05/23 (see Appendices)

compelled to live in the moment which explains his inability to explain himself and, more importantly, why he lies, because he has no other method of communicating. David Roberts (2017), who was cited earlier, explains that

> much of the dialogue around [Trump], the journalism and analysis, even the statements of his own surrogates, amounts to a desperate attempt to construct a *Theory of Trump*, to explain what he does and says through some story about his long-term goals and beliefs.

Roberts argues that 'we badly want to understand Trump' in order 'to give us some sense of control, or at least an ability to predict what he will do next... because we are not accustomed to having someone so obviously disordered in a position of such power.'

Indeed, the burgeoning literature that Carlos Lozada (2020c) has written about speaks to this need to understand Trump. As Roberts explains, this is what the right and the left have both been engaged in doing—attempting to construct what Roberts calls 'a Theory of Trump' that would make him and his politics explicable:

> politicians, journalists, analysts, the public — everyone wants some kind of story, some *Theory of Trump*... to weave a coherent narrative around his careening, erratic lies... they need for Trump... to have a plan', something that will explain him.

As we noted in the earlier chapters, the right have sought refuge in the idea that Trump is Jacksonian or else a pragmatist while the left have preferred to argue that he is a Machiavellian politician who, for example, was intent on remaking the presidency, as the likes of Hennessey and Wittes (2020a) have argued. However, Roberts suggests that 'we need to stop looking for a more complicated story' because

> no agenda guides [Trump], no past commitments or statements restrain him, so no one, not even his closest allies (much less the American public or foreign governments) can trust him, even for a second. He will do what makes him feel dominant and respected, in the moment, with no consideration of anything else, not because he has chosen to reject other considerations, but because he is, by all appearances, incapable of considering them.

Leonard Pitts (2016) explains that critics have 'overworked [their] thesauruses and [their] imaginations to describe Donald Trump.' Yet, despite the fact Trump 'does not hide what he is', he remains elusive. It can be argued the reason Trump defies easy explanation, why he remains elusive or indeed opaque, is because his critics fail to properly understand how a politician can succeed despite a proclivity for relentlessly lying. As Pitts explains, a liar is someone who, perhaps like Machiavelli, tells 'strategic untruths... for expedience or advantage.' However, Trump's lies are conspicuous for their lack of strategic purpose. This absence of strategic purpose is explained by the fact that Trump is a politician who is ideologically unmoored. Which explains why his lies differ from other politicians and, more especially, why he is so readily misunderstood.

Most conventional politicians have an ideological view of the world—which provides them with some basis for critically engaging with and developing an understanding of their world. Moreover, engagement in political debate requires the parties to the debate to understand each other's position. Trump however does not understand this and reverts to what he knows best, which is to lie (Baker, 2020). Jeet Heer (2015), citing the work of the philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005), explains that 'it is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth'. In other words, lying requires you to lie about something you know to be true. Trump, however, is unable to make this distinction because 'there is no truth that Trump is aware of and that he tries to hide away from us' (Sarajlic, 2016). According to Heer, this makes Trump 'worse than a liar'. Both Heer and Sarajlic conclude that Trump is a 'bullshitter', as defined by the work of Harry Frankfurt. Fareed Zakaria (2016) agrees that Trump is a bullshitter but concludes that Trump's lies are explained by the fact that he 'has lost all connection with reality'. The idea that Trump is a nothing more than a bullshitter goes some way to explaining why he appears to be a conviction free politician with little or no understanding of politics and, while this political-psychological conjecture has considerable traction among Trump's critics (McAdams, 2016, 2020a & 2020b), a further explanation is needed to fully understand the depth of Trump's ignorance as a politician.

Leonard Pitts (2016) agrees too that Trump is a bullshitter—he goes on to write that 'there is no demure synonym that captures the man with such crystalline accuracy'. Pitts goes on to explain that Trump has 'no core values holding him together, unless you count the value of always doing whatever gratifies or advances Donald Trump and his ego in a given moment'. Pitts concludes that Trump is nothing more than 'a carnival barker', someone who 'stands for nothing' precisely because he is unburdened by any sort of ideological considerations. He is, quite simply, unmoored. He is, therefore, free to lie without reference to facts, because facts are not matters that concern him. Paradoxically, there is an inverse relationship between what he knows and how much he lies.

Salena Zito's (2016) juxtaposition about taking Trump 'literally but not seriously' speaks to a confusion harboured by many of Trump's critics. By taking Trump literally they are compelled to subscribe to a belief in a boundlessly cunning Trump—a Machiavellian. However, this is to credit Trump excessively—to make such an argument and sustain it there has to be evidence of a strategic plan. But, as we know, Trump does not so much scorn the idea of a plan he simply lacks any understanding about why he might need a plan.

The absence of an ideological grounding would compromise Trump's presidency on a number of levels manifesting itself most obviously by the fact that Trump's only guide to what was in the best interests of the country was his so-called intuition (Lamb & Neiheisel, 2020, p. 7). Robert Spitzer (2020, p. 156) makes the same point when explaining that 'Trump does not care about policy... he has no ideological fixed star, no embedded policy preferences. Like Trump's treatment of the truth, policy is a completely fungible commodity for him.'

In effect, we only know Donald Trump by what he says but, as his former Chief of Staff, Mark Meadows is reported to have said, '[Trump] has a certain way of speaking and what he means—well, the sum can be greater or less than the whole' (Wolff, 2023). In the same article Michael Wolff asks 'Does Mr. Trump mean what he says? And what exactly does he mean when he says what he says?' How then do we decipher Trump or indeed arrive at a theory of Trump? For Maggie Haberman, the closer you get to developing an understanding of Trump the more he appears opaque. Yet, in the concluding remarks to her book, she explains why she thinks Trump is opaque and, in doing so, reveals why it is so difficult to decipher Trump or indeed develop what David Roberts (2017) has described as *A Theory of Trump:* it is, quite simply, because Trump's critics have, to paraphrase Haberman, 'read meaning and depth into [Trump's] every action (2022, p. 508). They have, in effect, taken him literally but not seriously (Zito, 2016). The idea that Trump is a Machiavellian politician is revealing of a compulsion to remove the imbroglio of misunderstanding that surrounds him for an ideological narrative that promises some degree of clarity: incoherence for coherence. But, after scrapping away questions of truth, motivation and unreliable narrative, he remains as elusive as ever. This is because his critics fail to understand Trump. When, for example, he is accused of lying to his political advantage (Pfiffner, 2020) it is argued that he does so knowing that he is lying to his advantage, per Machiavelli. However, all the evidence suggests the opposite. Any advantage is incidental to the lie. As Michael Wolff (2023) explains 'many [critics] have come to assume that the dastardly effect of Mr. Trump's political success must mean that he has an evil purpose.' Wolff goes on: 'he will say almost anything that pops into his head at any given moment, often making a statement so confusing in its logic that to maintain one's own mental balance, it's necessary to dismiss its seriousness on the spot or to pretend you never heard it'. The problem, as Wolff makes clear, are 'the epistemological challenges of explaining... a man whose behaviour defies and undermines the structures and logic of civic life.' Politically and ideologically, this is why Trump is difficult to understand. Quite simply, he is unable to explain himself, much less what he believes. In effect he defies ready comprehension because of what Wolff describes as an

unmediated fire hose of verbiage, an unstoppable sequence of passing digressions, gambits and whims, more attuned to the rhythms of his voice than to any obligation to logic or, often, to any actual point or meaning at all and hardly worth taking notice of (op cit)

Wolff concludes that Trump succeeds despite himself, because he creates chaos. This, for Wolff, is why Trump defies easy explanation. Trump's critics approach him as if he was a conventional politician. It seems absurd that a presidential candidate could become president with no understanding of the constitution, no understanding of policy and no developed conception of what, ideologically, he wanted to achieve but all the evidence strongly supports this fact: Trump had little or no understanding of the presidency or indeed of politics.

The critical factor is that Trump entered the presidential race and the presidency without a definite plan. His self-absorption in his own unfailing genius meant that he would reject all efforts to lend ideological substance to his campaign and, fatally, to his presidency. He appears to be a Machiavellian politician, but this is to both misunderstand Machiavelli and more especially the transgressive personality of Donald Trump. He would, however, succeed despite himself.

Conclusion

This thesis had sought to understand the politics of Donald Trump. What animated the research was a perception that a considerable number of political commentators and, more especially, critics of Trump, had appeared to misunderstand him. It was evident from much that had been written about Trump that his critics appeared unwilling to relinquish the idea that Trump might be apolitical. Trump's critics were content to dismiss him, but their dismissals were caveated: they found it difficult to comprehend that somebody so obviously unqualified to become president could *really* be so unqualified. As a consequence, they would hold to the idea that Trump could be explained, that he was a political actor (Winter, 2018).

From the late nineteen seventies Donald Trump views were regularly sought by the media (Danner, 2016; Oreskes, 1997; Orin, 1999). With his new-found celebrity, Trump could be relied upon to court controversy and, in doing so, he would muse upon the question of becoming president (Costa & Rucker, 2015; Kranish, 2017; Nagourney, 1990; Reeve, 2015; Samuels & Boburg, 2016; Shenk, 2016; Street, 2018). Trump would especially opine on matters of foreign policy—that countries were getting the better of America. It was because of this that he was said to have a 'worldview' (Laderman & Simms, 2017). However, as this thesis explains, when examined, Trump's worldview would collapse into nothing more substantial than a nostalgic belief that somewhere in the past everything was better—which had become a recurring theme in American politics (Bryant, 2021; Gilmore, Rowling, Edwards & Allen, 2020; Hart, 2020a; Hofstadter, 1964; Perlstein, 2001 & 2011; Pruessen, 2020). Notably, despite Trump's claim that government was responsible for America's decline, he was unable to explain exactly how he would halt this decline—despite nearly forty years of fulminating about the precarious position the country found itself in (Kaczynski, 2017; Larison, 2018; Larres, 2020). However, the idea that America's best days were in the past was something that many Americans sought refuge in: that with the right government America could be great again (Bradlee, 2018). It is here that we begin to see the first vestiges of Trump's approach to politics: he would bloviate on any number of matters, argue that he could resolve the problems and then fail to explain how he would do so (Abelson, 2015; Beauchamp, 2016a; Danner, 2016; D'Antonio, 2016; Flores, 2016; Ford, 2015; Goldberg, 2017; Greenfield, 2016; Johnson, 2017 & 2018; Johnson, T., 2011; Kaczynski, 2017; Kranish & Fisher, 2017; MacGregor, 2019; O'Brien, 2016; Romano, 1984). His political philosophy amounted to nothing more than a proposition that he knew the answer to the problems that had beset America, while refusing to disclose exactly how he would solve the problem, save by doing deals (Blake, 2016). However, as chapter three reveals, Trump's dealmaking abilities were limited and, without any previous experience of government (Astor &

Parlapiano, 2019; Grier & Kiefer, 2017; Irwin, 2017; Johnson, 2011; Jones, 2009) or a set of clearly delineated ideological beliefs, his presidency would be compromised by controversy—much of which could be attributed to Trump's management, a virtue he had burnished during his campaign for the presidency (Kruse, 2017a; Prins, 2017).

As chapter one explained, Trump's idea of what it took to be a success in business was at odds with best business practice (Newport & Saad, 2016; Taylor, 2015; Videla, 2016; Webber, 2012). Moreover, as various business commentators would note, the failure of many of Trump's ventures could be explained by Trump's misunderstanding of what it took to successfully negotiate (Adams, 2015).

Trump seemed to believe his own rhetoric—that he was a consummate business leader who could get a deal done (Greenhouse, 2015). Trump would leaven his belief in his own success—as his book, *The Art of the Deal*, reveals. However, as chapter one details, Trump was not the success he claimed. His business philosophy, which, he would argue, qualified him to be a successful president, was an idealised version of what he *thought* it took to be a success. His failings as a businessman were revealing of someone who aspired to be a success (Swanson, 2016). Moreover, his successes owed more to serendipity than to the machinations of a consummate dealmaker. He claimed his presidency would be based on his success as a businessman (Beauchamp, 2016a; Prins, 2017; Rudalevige, 2106). It was. Just as he was unable to make a success of his business, he would similarly fail as president (Kamarck, 2020), despite the fact that both the Presidency, the House and the Senate being aligned (Schaeffer, 2021).[145]

Chapter one determined that Trump's past as a businessman had ill-prepared him for the role of president (Taylor, 2015). He had, before 2015, suggested that he would make a competent president—in doing so he would variously offer himself up as a prospective nominee for the Democratic Party, the Reform Party and latterly the Republican Party. In that time, he would adopt a multitude of political positions all of which were fleeting—however, unlike other presidential candidates, it would be difficult to identify Trump with a policy or principle that defined him or his politics. Trump retorted that what distinguished him was what he had learnt from business, and that was to be flexible. Indeed, Trump would claim that his experience in business had prepared him for the role of president, yet nothing could be further from the truth (Spector, 2017), as chapter one explains. The chapter examined his past as a businessman because it was assumed that someone who had so little political experience but who had dallied with the idea of running for president over a

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[145] For the first two years of the Trump administration.

considerable period would have developed a mature body of political ideas, following years of studied reflection, he would want to implement should he become president (Simon & Uscinski, 2012). Trump's failure to prepare for the role of president would, for example, be evidenced by his administration's preparations for the transition which, by all accounts was improvised and conducted on a whim (DeBonis, 2017; Gabbatt, 2016; Gills, Morgan & Patomäki, 2019; Kumar, 2019; Lewis, Bernard & You, 2018; O'Harrow & Boburg, 2018; Potter, Rudalevige,Thrower & Warber, 2019; Schwall, 2018; Spector, 2017; Tenpas, 2018a & 2018b).

Chapter one concluded that Trump's record in business was not one that could have prepared him to become president, despite Trump's claims to the contrary. Indeed, Trump's success as a businessman owed more to his penchant for publicity which, no doubt, he too may have come to believe. However, despite his frequent forays into politics and his periodic dalliance with the presidency, Trump was unable to explain how running a business might prepare him for the role of president. One might argue that Trump's failure as a businessman would be reflection on how he would conduct himself once in office.[146]

However, chapter one was revealing of a narrative that would take hold of Trump's critics and it was one they would be reluctant to relinquish. When trying to comprehend Trump his critics would embrace the narrative that Trump's business philosophy could be explained by his winner-take-all-take approach to life. Trump's critics would be complicit in propounding a characterisation of Trump that he had been cultivating for years—this characterisation spoke to Trump's portrayal of himself as businessman with what Conrad (2021) has described as a 'reptilian genius' who would variously be described as scheming, unscrupulous, shrewd, cunning, and wily—a lexicon of business clichés which Trump would mine to exhaustion. For Trump these were virtues—even if the evidence of his business failures suggested otherwise—but, for his critics, these characterisations of Trump, would become the lens through which they would analyse Trump. It is here that the conception of Trump as a Machiavellian politician arises—it is sometimes explicit, as chapter four describes but, more often than not, it is a narrative that is implied.

Trump promised dramatic change, yet he could not explain how this would be achieved, as chapters two and three explain. Into this vacuum entered Stephen K. Bannon who was quick to realise that Trump's candidacy was not predicated on 'actual policy proposals or a coherent ideology' (Kivisto, 2017, p. 27; Friedersdorf, 2018; Glasser, 2018; Lowry, 2015; Ryan, 2019; Suebsaeng, 2017; Swaim, 2017; Wolff, 2016). In his book, *Devil's Bargain: Steve*

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[146] Consider for example, the large turn over in staff; the various scandals and allegations of corruption that dogged the administration; the impeachments, etc. As Neustadt (1990) explains, 'the presidency is no place for amateurs' (p. 151)

Bannon, Donald Trump and the Storming of the Presidency, Joshua Green (2017) explains how Bannon saw Trump as a vehicle for promoting his own brand of right-wing politics: Bannon would do so by providing 'Trump with a fully formed, internally coherent worldview that accommodated Trump's own feelings' (ibid, p. 46). To do so, Bannon promoted the idea that Trump was heir to Andrew Jackson. Consequently, it would become 'a touchstone to reference' and lend Trump 'a patina of ideological legitimacy' (Frazier, 2017; Johnson & Tumulty, 2017); a much 'needed a presidential reference point' (Nichols, 2016; Hohmann, 2017). However, as chapter two detailed, the link between the presidencies of Donald Trump and Andrew Jackson was tenuous (Cheatham, 2017, 2018; Feller, 2021). Moreover, once in office, Trump quickly dispelled any arguments of an ideological alignment between his presidency and that of Andrew Jackson by dispensing with the services of Bannon (French, 2018; Lizza, 2017; Sargent, 2021). Thereafter, any pretensions that Trump could be compared to Jackson ended—albeit Trump would retain a portrait of his predecessor in the Oval Office.

The weaknesses in the argument that Trump was a Jacksonian applied equally to the argument that, ideologically, Trump was a pragmatist. Newt Gingrich (2017a) and Mychal Massie (2017) would contend that Trump was a pragmatist politician who would bring to bear some much needed commonsense on a body politic that had become mired in factionalism. In making their argument they would rely heavily on the evidence of Trump's business background—ignoring the fact that Trump's *success* owed more to rhetoric than substance, as chapter one concluded. Nevertheless, the proposition that Trump was a pragmatist drew on Trump's so-called ability to make deals—as both Gingrich and Massie explained. According to this argument, as a dealmaker, Trump was only interested in getting the right deal. But, as various critics of this approach would argue, this presupposed that the negotiator entered the negotiation without any sort of precondition or knowledge of the end result (Beauchamp, 2017; Caminiti, 2017; Irwin, 2017). Indeed, it would also presuppose that politics could be removed from the political process. In other words, this was an idealised conception of a politics where all the parties to a negotiation were well intended and had 'no skin in the game' (Safire, 2006). Added to which, this argument relied on the proposition that Trump was a consummate negotiator who was able to step outside the machinations of politics to do the right deal for the country. But, as chapter one explained, this was not borne out by the evidence.

Trump's many critics were aware of his indifference to political ideas, something that would animate much of what was written about Trump—it was apparent that Trump was a political chameleon who lacked any ideological understanding of how he might resolve the issues he claimed to have the answers to (Anton, 2016b; Chait, 2017a; Enten, 2016; Leonard, 2017;

Mollan & Geesin, 2020; Prokop, 2017; Rubin, 2016; Schmitt, 2016; Smith, 2017; Thiessen, 2016). However, in some regards, Donald Trump was no different to his predecessors or indeed his immediate successor—no previous president had been driven by an overtly ideological agenda. Indeed, it is often the contrary. However, unlike President Trump, all modern-day presidents have entered the office with an established background in politics or in government of some sort.[147] In other words, ideologically, their positions on matters of social, economic and foreign policy were known and while differences could often be a matter nuance, their polices were readily identifiable as belonging to those of either the centre left or the centre right. However, determining the politics of Donald Trump was not so easy. As Gerald Seib (2023) explains, 'Trump has always been more about emotion than policy.' Mark Leibovich makes much the same point when writing that 'Trumpism becomes more of a style...it is not tethered to a particular set of ideas' (2022, p. 284). Yet, despite this, the Trump administration would successfully introduce a swath of legislation that would include tax reform, deregulation, reform of the criminal justice system. The administration's most significant and indeed lasting legacy would be the appointment of conservative justices to the supreme and federal courts. By any measure these were considerable successes. But as I have argued, these were achieved *despite* Donald Trump. As Bob Woodward (2022a) would discover from his many interviews Trump was able to reel off his successes but was conspicuously unable to explain *how* or *why* his policies had succeeded. Indeed, when pressed to explain his approach on any particular issue Trump's frequent retort was to say that governing was down to nothing more than 'instinct' (ibid, p. 53). Throughout the twenty interviews Woodward conducted with Trump he would explain to Woodward that 'I think a lot of things are based on instinct. I'm here because of instinct' (ibid, p. 126). Trump attributed his instincts to the fact that 'I understand... stuff. You know, genetically' (ibid, p. 135).[148] Woodward remained perplexed by Trump's inability to explain how he thought as a politician or how, for example, he frames questions of policy, despite repeatedly seeking elaboration from the president. Trump simply explained that 'the ideas are mine, Bob. The ideas are mine... Want to know something? Everything is mine' (ibid, p. 414). Woodward was compelled to conclude that 'there was no strategy, no plan. It was all determined by Trump's feelings and instincts' (ibid, p. 53). Furthermore, Trump 'wanted to do it alone. Based on personal instinct and natural ability. And with a stunning disregard for experts' (p. 134).

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[147] President Eisenhower (1953 – 1961) had been in the military. However, it would be fair to argue that while his political leaning may have been unknown he had, nevertheless, been immersed in the politics of the Second World War from 1943 onwards and especially so after he had been appointed Supreme Allied Commander which required him to balance the competing political and military interests of the Allied powers. See Harbaugh, 2015.

[148] Trump was reflecting on his knowledge of nuclear power which he had acquired not because he had studied the issue but genetically because his uncle had worked at MIT.

It is evident from the interviews that when pressed about matters of substance Trump simply changes the subject. It gives rise to the suggestion that he is unable or unwilling to engage in complex debate. Possibly, this might be explained by who he is and, no doubt, by the fact that he is rarely challenged. Of course, when Trump's so-called instincts betrayed him, he would lay the blame elsewhere. Woodward would conclude that Trump had no 'understanding of his responsibilities as president.' Instead, according to Woodward, Trump had 'enshrined personal grievance and division as a governing principle of his presidency' (ibid, p. 407) by 'defin[ing] himself less by what he is for and more by and what he is against' (Seib, 2023). Indeed, as Woodward repeatedly found, Trump could not explain how or what his policies were based on. And, over the course of his campaign and then into the presidency, Trump was unable to move much beyond his much-repeated mantras that he 'alone' would 'fix it'. However, if you only define yourself by what you are against, it becomes difficult to understand how you might fix something when, as Trump would find, you are unable to comprehend how that thing was broken in the first place. Ideologically untethered, and with no experience of government or politics, Trump's background in business did not prepare him for the complexities of government—as indeed he would be forced to admit when it came to his administration's proposed reforms of the Affordable Care Act (Adler, Mason & Holland, 2017; Berman, 2017a; Carey, et al, 2019; Cillizza, 2017; Dawsey, Goldmacher & Isensadt, 2017; Gearan, 2017; Johnson, 2021; Kruse, 2018; Landler,2017; Noonan, 2017; Radnofsky, Armour & Peterson 2017; Waldman, 2017). While the electorate might be seduced by simple answers to complex questions the reality of government was quite different. Richard Neustadt (1990) in his seminal work on the presidency, *Presidential Power*, explained that the power of the presidency 'is the power to persuade' (pp. 101 – 111). But, as Trump would demonstrate, this was a power he was unable to realise much less use— despite his claims to be a consummate negotiator.

Yet, despite all of this, Trump's critics are wedded to a way of explaining him that gave rise to the idea that he was a Machiavellian politician. In turn, this invited in the proposition that Trump was a more substantive politician, a politician who thought and acted strategically. But, as chapter four explained, this was to both misunderstand Machiavelli and, more especially, to misunderstand Trump. His critics had, in effect, leant him intellectual succour, even if they intended otherwise, by regarding him as a strategic politician who plotted his every move—giving rise to the suggestion that Trump was ideologically driven. It would be here that the likes of Bannon, Gingrich, Massie and Hanson would try to leverage the proposition that Trump was an ideologue: a Jacksonian or else a pragmatist. We can conclude that the attempts by various right-wing thinkers and commentators to *explain* Trump was itself evidence of the fact that Trump was *not* an ideologue. Why there was a compulsion to explain Trump remains a matter of conjecture. It might be, as Roberts (2017)

has written, reflective of a desire to develop *A Theory of Trump*, a theory that would remove the *opaqueness* that Maggie Haberman (2022) describes. Most likely it reflects a cultural, as well as a political expectation and recognition that the president of the United States had be elucidated in some way, to lend him a patina of credibility, to read meaning and depth into a politician who defied easy explanation. However, as this thesis explains, Trump is not so readily explained.

We can say that Trump embraces heterodoxy. However, what neither the right nor Trump's critics can explain is why. It might be that Trump cannot be explained—at least not by reference to conventional explanations. It is certainly the case that the Constitution did not envisage such an unconventional politician. What we can say is that Trump's unconventional style of doing politics is circumscribed by the man himself. Consequently, his successes have often been despite himself. Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe (2019, p. 19) refer to *the ordinary presidency of Donald Trump*—they explain that there is 'little evidence [to] suggest that Trump could deliver effective, or even barely competent leadership.' They prefer to describe an 'extraordinary president but an ordinary presidency.'

Trump was extraordinary because he was apolitical: he had no conception or understanding of the political process. His presidency would, perhaps more than any other presidency, reflect the man who held the office. His critics have sought to argue that he is a deliberative politician who, with his populist credo, posed a threat to democracy and the constitutional arrangements of the United States. There is no question that Trump posed such a threat—but this threat was not as a consequence of a deliberative politician.

We know very little about Trump's politics. We might conclude that this is because there is nothing to know—this is itself remarkable. Trump has, on occasion, sought to explain himself but, when he has done so, as Woodward found, it was revealing of how little politics interests him. When challenged or pushed to explain what he thinks Trump's response is to dissemble—as chapter four explained. However, considerable care should be taken when explaining Trump's lies. What Trump's critics have done is to try to make rational a phenomenon that defies rational explanation. Too often motivation is ascribed to Trump without the necessary attribution. Trump's critics have, like his supporters, confected a model to explain Trump who, because of a series of serendipitous circumstances, became president. As Edward Dovere (2021, p. 31) explains, Trump 'was not going to be like a normal politician [because] he did not believe in anything.' Into this political vacuum commentators have sought to arrive at a Theory of Trump—to make explicable someone who defies explanation.

We can similarly conclude that Trumpism is not an ideology—for example, John Bolton (2020b), argues that there is no such thing as Trumpism. Rather, as Bolton, explains and, as Michael Anton (2016b) was at lengths to argue, Trumpism means whatever Donald Trump wants it to mean. Both Bolton and Anton are at lengths to explain that Trump was unable to understand the concept much less define it.

To this, we can conclude that Trump's transgressive politics does not avail itself to an easy explanation (McLaughlin, 2016). Because of this, his presidency was characterised by incoherence. As the evidence here suggests, Trump was unable to comprehend democratic propriety. Benjamin Wittes (2020b) observed,

> When you behave in a certain way, over a long period of time... it's because you're actually proposing something. And you might not be aware of the theoretical implications of what you're proposing, you may not have theorized it at all, but you are proposing an idea of what the presidency looks like.

Defining the politics of an unconventional politician like Donald Trump is thwart with difficulties. Oddly, this problem appears to be lost on Trump's critics such is the compulsion to frame him in ways that are readily explicable—this is the paradox of trying to make coherent a politician is far from coherent and which, as I argue, explains why Trump is so readily misunderstood. However, at least the hard-right have recognised and indeed have embraced Trump's unconventional politics in what has proven to be an ultimately futile effort to define Trumpism.

The problem is that the transgressive presidency of Donald Trump requires a wholly different explanatory framework—as Susan Hennessey (2020b) explains

> Trump's vision of the presidency is not to do stuff, it's not to implement policy, it's to express the personal will of the president and the personal opinions of the president.

Appendices

Email exchanges with Professor James Pfiffner:

14/05/2023

Dear Professor Pfiffner

Please forgive this presumption on your time. I am a post-graduate student at Swansea University where my I am writing a thesis concerned with the presidency of Donald Trump.

In addition to your books and articles I have been reading your paper *The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy*. The paper has been enlightening.

I wonder if I might take a moment of your time to ask a question? In your paper, where you discuss Trump's dismissal of the press (I am referring to the Lesley Stahl interview with Trump), you have written the following: 'In a moment of candor Trump answered... [etc]'.

I was wondering what *exactly* you meant when you wrote that this was 'a moment of candor' from Trump? Were you inferring that Trump deploys lies with Machiavellian intent? In other words, do you regard Trump as a deliberative liar who uses lies as a stratagem to deceive, as in the case attributed to him in the quote? I ask because I am arguing the contrary. It is my contention that Trump is misunderstood—it is assumed that he is a deliberative politician (a Machiavellian) who, for example, uses lies conventionally—I am arguing that his lies are simply the expression of someone who does not understand politics much less policy. He is, for want of a better description, a carnival barker.

Yours sincerely

Mark Hughes

15/05/2023

Dear Mark,

Thanks for reading my article, and thanks for your note.

When I wrote about Trump's answer to Stahl, I intended to say that Trump was actually being honest. He did not say that the traditional press was unfairly maligning him, which would have been what I expected him to say. Rather he said that his purpose in attacking the press was to discredit them. In that statement, he was not claiming to be a victim of an unfair press but admitting that he was attacking the press as a ploy to undermine their credibility, which was an honest answer (in my judgment). He was admitting being Machiavellian, not claiming that he was unfairly criticized, which would have been his usual answer.

But you are raising a broader point: does Trump act rationally or merely as a carnival barker. I think that Trump is both a rational actor and a carnival barker. He acts instinctively, but also shrewdly. He knows how to incite his followers and realizes that this alienates conventional politicians and rational voters. Sometimes he actually seems to believe his lies — they become second (OK, first) nature to him. But he continues to pursue his lies even after being corrected by credible people (e.g. Barr telling him that there was no fraud in the 2020 elections).

He is a classic authoritarian populist who knows instinctively how to appeal to his base, and he is quite effective at it. He did not become president by accident; he is shrewd and cunning, even if he does not understand or care about the US Constitution or rule of law. He does not understand public policy, but he is a very effective politician; he has taken over the Republican Party and shifted many of its former values and policy preferences.

So, I conclude that, though he is a carnival barker, he is much more dangerous than a carnival barker. The parallels with Hitler are appropriate - at least in his appeal to the masses, if not in his explicit policy goals. He wants power for its own sake and does not care about US institutions or what is good for the country (or the world). He will stop at nothing that he thinks he can get away with.

Thanks again for reading my paper. I will attach a few other articles on Trump, in case you have not seen them and in case they are relevant to your research. Please do not feel obligated to read any of them.

Best

Jim Pfiffner

17/05/2023

Dear Professor Pfiffner

Further to my last email I wanted to make the following comments, commencing firstly with your paper *How Trump Tried to Overturn the 2020 Election*. Once again, please forgive my presumption.

In your paper you extensively detail the stages that Trump exhaustively pursued to overturn the election—and more especially the effectiveness of his lies. In terms of the chronology of events and Trump's increasingly desperate attempts to overturn the election I wondered if you would agree with my summation that there was a correlation (of sorts) between his denials and events—as each effort to overturn the election was refuted so Trump's denials would compound the other until their logical apotheosis on January 6. While, as you explain, 'reality was beginning to sink in' the simple fact was that 'Donald Trump would not accept the reality of his electoral defeat'.

For want of a better way of explaining my work it is probably best summed up by the word *reality*. Trump's attempts to overturn the election are, I think, best explained by the fact that we are dealing with someone who, quite simply, endowed with the power of the presidency, could endlessly pursue his denial of reality. This is something he has done throughout much of his life—deny reality—and, no doubt, had he been in any other business, without the benefit of his father's largesse, he would have been a complete failure. This, for me, is evidence of my argument that Trump is nothing more than a carnival barker. I agree that a carnival barker as president poses no end of problems especially someone so obviously able to deny objective reality, as Trump is able to do. Moreover, his apparent shrewdness is I think misunderstood. By way of an analogy a stopped clock is correct twice a day. Trump's apparent shrewdness is simply evidence that even someone so thoroughly compromised can appear, serendipitously, to be a deliberative politician or indeed a Machiavellian.

My point, I think, is that Trump's attempts to overturn the election are entirely consistent—the sad thing is that he is indulged—with the behaviour of someone who, because of his personality or a lack of intellectual engagement, is unable to comprehend or indeed contemplate the fact that the election was stolen. My thesis represents an attempt to expose

the fact that we treat Trump as a purposive actor at our cost—which is the failure to properly understand him or indeed what Trumpism means by lending him the idea that he is a purposive actor. In so doing we treat him as a conventional politician. The danger is that he is predictably unpredictable but in saying so many authors appear to commence from the position that this is a ruse or stratagem for obtaining and retaining power. Of course, it works but it does so despite Trump and the unique circumstances in which he finds himself.

I would venture too that Trump's undermining of the norms of the presidency (*Donald Trump and the Norms of the Presidency*) are consistent with his attempts to overturn the election result. In your opening to that article, you have written:

Donald Trump was the first person to come to the presidency with no experience in government or the military. Thus, he did not absorb the values of public service or military discipline and respect for the Constitution. He never had a boss other than his father, nor did he work in a large organization, so he did not absorb the values of large functioning bureaucracies.

While this is not at dispute, I wondered whether you were implying that his inexperience explains his subsequent behaviour as president? In other words, would we be witnessing such an aberrant departure from the norms of presidential behaviour in anyone other than Donald Trump? My argument is that his behaviour may indeed be compounded by his lack of experience but, importantly, what explains his behaviour is his transgressive personality. Lying is a part of that personality. For Trump, the role of president has nothing to do with politics but everything to do with power which is explained by the fact that he is ideologically unmoored. His only true engagement in the role of president is presentational, but even this he struggles with. In terms of policy, he suffers a form of cognitive dissonance because is unable to explain what he doesn't know or indeed understand what he should know which leaves him utterly perplexed: the result manifests itself in lying. My argument is that Trump does not flout the norms of presidential behaviour deliberatively; it is not a stratagem that he is pursuing—if it was, he would fail! I am therefore sceptical about whether, as you write, *his vision was not only to reverse the policies of Democrats, particularly President Barack Obama, but also to figuratively poke his finger in the eye of the political establishment in Washington*. He may have argued that this was his intention but there is, I think, a huge gap between the rhetoric of what sells and his actual engagement in policy. My disagreement sits with your contention that Trump is not a hypocrite. I agree with you. But if, as you argue, Trump is entirely consistent then he is consistently inconsistent for the reasons I have argued. Trump's authenticity is not an act. By this I mean there is no evidence that he decided to conduct himself in this way—as, for example, a political stratagem. Indeed, his transgressions are evidence of this. Why else would a politician seek to undermine himself at every stage of his presidency? Trump simply disparages anyone who opposes him or who he perceives as opposing him. He disparages the Democrats, the press and the establishment because they oppose him—he pokes them in the eye. But he does not set out to do this. It is simply an extension of who he is not because he has devised a methodology for expressing his opposition to these parties in the way that he does. In other words, I would contend that if asked he would be unable to explain his success.

In the same article you have written: *When asked during the 2016 campaign why he continued to exploit dissension, Trump answered, "I guess because of the fact that I immediately went to No. 1 and I said, 'Why don't I just keep the same thing going.'"* On the face of it this quote would appear to undermine everything I have written above. However, as Machiavellian as this quote might sound, I am far from convinced that Trump was really articulating a stratagem for how he intended to conduct his rallies. Like any sophist Trump simply responds to his audience—indeed there is a strong case to argue that Trump does not lead but rather is led by his audiences. Moreover, when Trump reportedly said that 'why don't I just keep the same thing going' he is being authentic—in other words he didn't know

anything else or any other way of engaging with his audiences because as we know, when he was scripted, he can be relied upon not to follow his script.

In your paper *President Trump and the Shallow State: Disloyalty at the Highest Levels* I wondered if it was your contention that the reason Trump's staff variously sought to undermine him was because he was a Machiavellian politician bent on pursuing a policy agenda? Because to me it would appear that his staff sought to oppose him not because these were *considered* policies but rather, his staff opposed Trump, as you explain, because 'of the nature of Trump's leadership'. Had Trump been a Machiavellian actor with but only the slightest interest in the successful execution of his policies then, most likely, he would have been alert to and aware of these issues within his administration and, moreover, insistent on his policies being realised legislatively, etc. However, all the evidence suggests otherwise: Trump was disengaged in the policy process even if he regarded the undermining of his policies as 'treason'. Furthermore, you explain the opposition to the president 'demonstrate[d] a lack of confidence in Trump's judgment'. This could be explained in two ways: Trump was a conventional Nixon-like politician who intended to pursue his Machiavellian policy goals and had to be thwarted or else he was a carnival barker interested only in power for its own sake. I would argue that the evidence supports the latter characterisation of a president who was uninterested in policy and therefore unconcerned with how his policies were implemented.

Finally, in your paper, *Organising the Trump Presidency*, you won't be surprised to learn that I will argue that much of what you have written confirms my thesis. The quote cited from *The Art of the Deal* accurately reflects what we know about how Trump organised the White House. However, I would argue that Trump's open-door policy was not the result of deliberation i.e. it was not the result of design but rather was the consequence of a manager who, arguably, was successful despite himself and, because of this, saw no reason to change—no doubt a conventional management model would have improved Trump's profits if he had the good sense to realise as much. Similarly, had Trump been a deliberative manager/politician, operating conventionally and to an ideologically explicable agenda, he would have recognised the need to implement a management model that would ensure that his policies etc were implemented (Machiavelli would, I suspect, have advised him to adopt such a model). However, Trump was only interested power for its own sake—even if he was unable to articulate, recognise or admit as much. Therefore, he had no need for a conventional management system even if he didn't understand this. The ensuing problems the administration would face, which you comprehensively document, are, I think an unavoidable consequence of a manager/president who was solely interested in power and the appearance of power.

Best regards

Mark Hughes

21/05/23

Dear Mark,

I agree with you that Trump is not a rational actor in the Machiavellian sense, i.e. carefully calculating the consequences of each of his actions. Rather, he is an instinctive and intuitive demagogue. But I think that your characterization of him as a carnival barker underestimates his effectiveness as a power aggrandizer. There are many ambitious carnival barkers and rational politicians who would like to be rich and be president, but very few of them are successful. Trump has been successful, both in business and in politics, despite his unsuitability for either profession. He has a reasonable chance to be elected president in

2024, despite his terrible record as a human being and president. Dismissing him as merely a carnival barker does not do justice to his success against all odds.

In looking for frameworks to understand Trump, you might look at the careers of other successful demagogues in history. Some of them may have been rational in a Machiavellian way, but some of them may have been successful despite a lack of cunning rationality. I agree with you that Trump does not care about policy or ideology; all he cares about is power – but he has been successful in gaining power in his career in business and politics. Despite important differences in scope, it might be useful for you to apply your framework to Hitler. I do not know German history well, but the conservative elite in Germany saw Hitler as an ignorant dunce whom they could use for their own purposes. But once he attained power, Hitler used them for his own purposes. Trump has taken over the Republican Party in the US. That is amazing.

Part of Trump's appeal is that he has an instinct for understanding the resentments of people who feel left out and denigrated. He is able to play on their worst instincts of racism and resentment and unleash their violent tendencies. He gives them license to act out their resentments in support of Trump. This did not happen by chance; Trump understands their resentments and is very effectively exploiting them.

You are right that Trump might be more effective in achieving specific policy goals or staying in power if he were more rational, but he cannot help himself from acting out his insecurities and undermining his own power and success. But that does not mean that he cannot come back in 2024. The leaders of the Republican Party were not able to stop him in 2016, even though they wanted to. And they will have a difficult time stopping him in 2024.

Trump was not successful in reversing the 2020 election – but it was close. If Pence had caved-in to Trump's pressure or if Raffensperger in Georgia had "found" the votes Trump needed or the Governor had done what Trump wanted, we would have had a real crisis and Trump might have been successful.

Trump is not a conventional politician, but he is purposive. He wants power for himself and is willing to do anything to achieve it. Ignoring that reality is dangerous for the American political system. I also think that he often flouted the conventions of presidential behavior purposely. Look at his quotes about being "presidential." Flouting norms is part of his appeal to his base.

In sum, I agree with most of your observations about Trump, and you should have a good dissertation examining the ways in which he acts non-rationally (though some of his non-rational actions are not irrational). Keep up the good work!

Best,

Jim Pfiffner

25/05/23

Dear Professor Pfiffner,

Thank you for your reply.

I agree that Trump is an instinctive and intuitive demagogue—and so too your explanation about his appeal to his electorate. However, I would contend that his appeal comes despite

himself. His take-over of the GOP is not disputed but, like his appeal to a certain part of the electorate, it is not a consequence of a stratagem but rather the result of circumstances. My point is that Trump may serendipitously be the beneficiary of circumstances (his base, the GOP, etc) but he has no idea or plan about how to put this to use (which is where Trump differs from Hitler). Insofar that I agree about his instincts they are exactly that—he acts impulsively which, more often than not, when it comes to policy (as opposed to titillating his base), he flounders. Turning instinct into something more substantive is, I would venture, beyond him (and, moreover, where others have sought to lend him substance, he quickly reverts to instinct rather than logic and, more often than not, he undermined his own policy positions precisely because his instincts were out of kilter with his limited comprehension).

Again, I agree that he flouted the norms of conventional presidential behaviour but, if you recall, many observers were predicting that the weight of the office would serve to circumscribe his behaviour. But, as we know, it did nothing of the sort. Which is exactly my point. His authenticity i.e. inability to alter his behaviour speaks volumes and must be taken as evidence of a president who acts instinctively and impulsively but with little comprehension or appreciation for the intended let alone unintended consequences of his actions. He instinctively flouts norms precisely because they are norms and, no doubt, would do so whether this appealed to his base or not.
I guess my point is that though Trump purposively seeks power and indeed appears willing to do most anything to achieve/attain that power he does so instinctively. However, instinct will only take him so far as was demonstrated by his attempts to reverse the 2020 election results.

Kind regards

Mark

26/05/23

Hello Mark,

Thanks for your note. We do not disagree much, I think. But I give Trump more credit for taking advantages of circumstances that you do. I also think that, because of his skill as a demagogue, he is more dangerous than you think. He may not be a skilful policy entrepreneur, but he did many things that the right wing of the Republican Party wanted, e.g. large tax cuts, Supreme Court appointments, hostility toward NATO, Muslim ban. Had he been more skilful, he might have been more successful, but he made major changes to the Republican Party and American politics. The harm he has caused will long outlast him.

You are welcome to cite our correspondence in your dissertation.

Keep up the good work.

Jim

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